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**Ecclesiological Contributions of Emerging Churches for Their Parent
Communities**

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DECLARATION

15 October 2013

I, Todd J. Stockdale, hereby declare that I have written this thesis and that the work done here is entirely my own.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Todd J. Stockdale", is written over a horizontal line.

Todd J. Stockdale

Abstract

This thesis examines the contributions that emerging churches make to their parent communities' understanding of church. As a work in practical theology, it focuses on the theology that is deeply embedded within the everyday language, symbols, and practices of ordinary individuals and communities. Thus, the research in this thesis centres on two concrete emerging communities and employs qualitative methods to examine and analyse the actual practices, values, and beliefs of community participants—treating the data generated through the investigation of these emerging churches as theological material. The thesis is structured in six chapters, beginning in chapter one with a preliminary sketch of the wider emerging church phenomenon, a brief account of the researcher's own earlier experiences with emerging communities, and an initial overview of the research already conducted on emerging church. Following this introduction, the thesis outlines the research methodology in chapter two, taking an approach to practical theology that moves beyond the prevalent models of correlation and recognizes the embodied nature of theology. Identified in this thesis as 'theology in the vernacular' or 'local theologies', this approach provides a mechanism for bringing two emerging churches into an impactful encounter with their parent communities' understanding of church. This encounter unfolds through the remaining four chapters of the thesis. Chapter three provides the ecclesial context for this research by outlining the history and development of emerging church, and locating the two emerging communities within that narrative. Chapters four and five offer an in-depth portrayal and analysis of these two communities by depicting their ecclesial contexts and historical development, their weekly patterns, their physical and online spaces, their worship gatherings, the profiles and personal narratives of their participants, and the core practices of these communities. The findings from these separate sites of research are brought together in chapter six, where five key ecclesiological features are drawn from the common patterns present in these emerging churches. These are: (1) the prevalence of an ecclesial eclecticism, (2) the carving out of a space for theological discussion and intellectual enquiry, (3) a resolute fondness for their local cities, (4) the vital nature of the weekly gathering, and (5) a robustly verbal orientation in the worship gatherings. By bringing these five ecclesiological features into an encounter with the parent tradition of these emerging churches in chapter six, the contribution that these emerging churches are making to their parent communities' understanding of church is explored. This thesis argues that these emerging communities are offering their parent communities two alternative ways of understanding church. The first is an understanding of church as a space for ecclesial borrowing and blending—which impacts on the formulation of a community's ecclesial identity. The second is an understanding of church as a space for discussion, enquiry, and doubt—which impacts on the nature of belonging in ecclesial communities.

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Chapter One: Introduction to Emerging Church

In the years since the turn of the twenty-first century, an increasing amount of ecclesial attention has been cast towards the materialization of diverse collections of congregations and individuals loosely arranging themselves under the nomenclature ‘emerging church’. While emerging church eludes precise definition and blurs lines of demarcation, the classification ‘emerging’ is commonly being used to describe ecclesial communities, networks and individuals that engage with postmodern cultures in a missional or contextual manner.¹ This thesis presents an empirical exploration of two churches that have identified with this developing conversation,² in the aim of identifying the contributions they make to their parent communities’ understanding of what it is to be church. As these two churches represent the primary focus of this thesis, a detailed consideration of both the development of emerging church and the concrete experiences of those participating in these communities will be essential. Yet, before turning my focus in this direction, I first provide a preliminary sketch of the wider emerging church phenomenon, a brief account of my own history and involvement with emerging communities, and an overview of the research already conducted on this subject.

Introduction to the Research Topic

Investigations into new forms of Christianity in the West will inevitably lead one into the nebulous territory of emerging church—a hazy region inhabited by a great deal of unclassifiable Christian phenomena. Although rightly recognized by James K.A. Smith as a ‘growing sensibility’—indeed a ‘postmodern sensibility’—rather than a

¹John Drane, “Editorial: The Emerging Church,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6 (March 2006): p. 4.

² Many emerging church participants initially preferred the term *conversation* as opposed to *movement* to describe the emerging church phenomenon—emphasizing the grassroots and fluid nature of those participating, as well as the congenial spirit that permeates their relationships. See: Tony Jones, “Introduction: Friendship, Faith, and Going Somewhere Together,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, ed. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2007), pp. 11-12. While this assertion is appreciated, it has proved unconvincing for one critic who has pointed to the proliferation of organizations, conferences, events, literature, websites, internet blogs, and churches who readily appropriate the nomenclature *emerging* in a self-identifying fashion as an indication that the emerging church should indeed be interpreted as a *movement*—albeit a fluid one with porous boundaries. See: D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant With the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005), pp. 9, 12. In this thesis the terms *conversation* and *phenomenon* will be employed to describe that which is emerging, as this language best represents the complexity and the decentralized nature of this uncoordinated situation.

‘new denomination’, ‘organized fellowship of churches’, or even a ‘movement’,³ emerging church, as an ecclesiastical subject matter, has received considerable attention over the past decade. During this period of time, more than one ecclesialogist has experienced the frustration of attempting to decipher the notoriously amorphous emerging church—as it is a slippery entity that habitually resists classification and frequently crosses over fixed categories. In this section, I put forward a preliminary sketch of the wider emerging church phenomenon. However, due to the complex nature of emerging churches, this initial overview does not represent a full inquiry into this phenomenon and therefore a more nuanced portrayal of emerging church develops in subsequent chapters—with the history and development of emerging church being presented in chapter three, and a detailed description of two emerging communities being presented in chapters four and five.

Locating the Emerging Church Phenomenon

Sharing a dissatisfaction with the perceived absolutist assertions of modernity and a frustration with ‘quick, easy, pat, and ready-made doctrinal answers to life’s most difficult questions’, those participating in emerging church conversations seek to plot a new course for the Church through the ‘postmodern wilderness of doubt, despair, deconstruction, and disintegration’.⁴ Although there is a scarcity of agreement amongst theorists concerning the exact nature of this ‘postmodern’ context and how it relates to modernity, with some opting for the term ‘liquid modernity’ or ‘late modernity’ to describe the current climate in the West, for this thesis I will use the word ‘postmodern’ as it is the preferred term in emerging church literature.⁵

³ James K.A. Smith, “The Emerging Church: A Guide for the Perplexed,” *Reformed Worship* 77 (September 2005): p. 40.

⁴ Joshua M. Moritz, “Beyond Strategy, Towards the Kingdom of God: The Post-Critical Reconstructionist Mission of the Emerging Church,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2008): p. 28.

⁵ For an understanding of *liquid* or *late* modernity see Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000); Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990). For an investigation into the relationship between liquid modernity and church see: Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2002); and Kees de Groot, “The Church in Liquid Modernity: A Sociological and Theological Exploration of a Liquid Church,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6, no. 1 (March 2006): pp. 91-103.

The primary hubs of activity for emerging church phenomena are North America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. Non-western expressions have surfaced through world-wide networks of like minded churches that exist in organizations such as *Amahoro*—which ‘seeks to encourage and facilitate a global conversation and network of friendships among Christian leaders engaging with the postcolonial, postmodern world’, and links ecclesial communities together in places such as Latin America, Africa, and Malaysia.⁶ Although emerging church exists as a global conversation, the published literature focuses principally upon expressions in North America and the United Kingdom. In fact, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger’s work—which is widely recognized as the most complete study of this set of ecclesial connections—acknowledges the worldwide nature of the emerging church, but limits their research to churches in the United States and the United Kingdom.⁷ Similarly, the texture of the interpretation of emerging church below is strongly shaded towards a presentation of the network as found in these two regions, as they represent the immediate contexts of the two emerging communities that served as my sites of research.

Definitions and Interpretations of Emerging Church

As already suggested, developing a definition which accurately and fairly summarizes emerging church phenomena has proven to be a complicated and elusive task. Other researchers have shared this difficulty, as evidenced by the amount of article space each devotes to framing the conversation. Don Carson, an early critic of emerging churches in the United States, expressed this difficulty and frustration in his comment, ‘the diversity of the movement, as well as its porous borders, ensure that I have not found it easy to portray [emerging church] fairly’.⁸ In part, this difficulty in accurately portraying emerging church results from the early participants’ vigorous attempts to resist the received ecclesial categories and their unwillingness to draw clear parameters around what *is* and *is not* an emerging church. What is more, as Stuart Murray argues, emerging churches are so disparate

⁶ Amahoro. “Amahoro Means.” Amahoro, <http://www.amahoro.info/> (accessed 28 September 2007).

⁷ Indeed, Gibbs and Bolger comment, ‘As we plotted these emerging churches around the world... we observed that the U.K. and the U.S. seemed to have the most in terms of numbers, and so we chose our case studies from these countries.’ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (London: SPCK, 2006), p. 8.

⁸ Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, p. 9.

that there is an exception to every generalization. He contends that ‘most are too new and too fluid to classify’ and therefore, there exists no ‘agreed scheme for categorising what is emerging’.⁹ The range of individual voices contributing to the emerging church conversation further exacerbates this untidiness.¹⁰ Indeed, within the wider emerging church phenomenon, there exists not only a mix of ecclesial communities, but also a diverse contingency of individuals who have chosen to disassociate themselves from church in both its institutional manifestations and localized demonstrations.¹¹

Thus, if the assertions of researchers are correct, and there is in fact ‘no single pattern of emerging church’,¹² then identifying common characteristics which adequately represent just a portion of emerging churches—much less the whole of this phenomenon—is sure to be a demoralizing endeavour. What is more, even if one is able to accurately encapsulate the defining features of emerging church, the fluidity of communities taking part in this ecclesial movement ensures that such descriptions could only be provisional. This diversity and shifting of expression has prompted Stuart Murray to comment:

Perhaps the most evocative image for describing and interpreting emerging church is a child’s toy, the kaleidoscope. Each time the viewer looks through the spy hole at the brightly coloured shards they have reconfigured themselves; different patterns have appeared. The

⁹ Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom* (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), p. 73. Murray catalogues a number of ecclesial expressions which may fall under the rubric *emerging*. These include, cell church, pub church, cyber-church, youth church, house church, alt. worship, and new monasticism. pp. 75-92.

¹⁰ For a sense of the various perspectives initially associated with emerging church, see Robert Webber’s edited volume outlining the beliefs of emerging churches. The views of these US contributors range from those of a ‘devoted biblicist’ ministering within an independent, evangelical church, to a ‘post-liberal’ leading an emerging congregation within a mainline denomination. Importantly, several of the contributors to this early volume are no longer associated with the emerging church conversation. Robert Webber ed., *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), pp. 16-18.

¹¹ Alan Jamieson has contributed extensive research around these *emerging* Christians who are contemplating their life of faith outside the church. See Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond the Churches* (London: SPCK, 2002), and “Churchless Faith: Trajectories of Faith Beyond the Church From Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Charismatic Churches to Post-Church Groups,” *International Review of Mission* 92 (April 2003): pp. 217-226.

¹² Scott Bader-Saye, “Improvising Church: An Introduction to the Emerging Church Conversation,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6 (March 2006): p. 14.

basic elements are unchanged, but there are many ways of displaying them.¹³

The difficulty in locating these essential qualities of emerging church is further compounded by the fact that the particular cultural and ecclesiastical perspective of the one looking at emerging church significantly determines what one sees when peering into this network of communities. To be more specific, what one determines ‘church’ to be, and how that relates to what is perceived to be ‘emerging’, often results in a unique description of the phenomenon that, while accurate, may stand at odds with the description of another observer.¹⁴ Still, even though emerging church remains difficult to define with any degree of precision or confidence, there is sufficient commonality within those communities that appropriate the nomenclature ‘emerging’ to begin identifying, characterizing and interpreting this phenomenon.

Frequently, the more concise definitions of emerging church put forward by researchers will centre upon the engagement these communities make with postmodern culture. For instance, Ray Anderson suggests that, ‘emerging churches represent a contemporary expression of the first-century church's existence and mission in a postmodern world’.¹⁵ While definitions such as this are serviceable, without qualification they do not completely capture the uniqueness of those communities participating in this emerging conversation. Indeed, being a contemporary expression of the church’s existence and mission in postmodern context could describe any number of Christian communities seeking to live faithfully—and many of these would not conceive of themselves as emerging churches.

The research conducted by Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger serves to mitigate this critique as their definition distinguishes the precise ways in which emerging churches seek to live faithfully in postmodern contexts. According to Gibbs and Bolger:

¹³ For Murray, the basic elements he observes in emerging churches are the foundational aspects of church— namely mission, worship and community. Murray, *After Christendom*, p. 93.

¹⁴ I pick this theme up again in chapter six when constructing a composite portrait of the two emerging communities that served as my sites of research.

¹⁵ Ray S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2007), p. 14.

Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures. This definition encompasses the nine practices. Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, and (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these activities, they (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities.¹⁶

As with the earlier definitions, the foundation to Gibbs and Bolger's understanding of emerging churches rests on the way these communities engage with postmodern culture. Consequently, the essence of their definition resides in the first sentence, 'emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus in postmodern cultures', and serves as the underpinning of their entire work.¹⁷

A more distinguishing definition comes from Bob Whitesel who sees 'emerging' as a designation fastened to churches populated primarily by young adults under the age of thirty.¹⁸ Although some participants, and specifically leaders, may be over thirty, Whitesel argues that an ability to attract and retain those less than thirty years of age epitomizes these communities. Indeed, while there are notable exceptions, participants in emerging churches have been identified as being largely between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five.¹⁹ Those who resist the idea of emerging churches being reduced to youth congregations contest this interpretation, and their objection has some merit, as emerging churches articulate a mission more substantive than being a church for young adults or a 'youth church'.²⁰ Gibbs and Bolger argue that to identify 'the emerging church with youth church is to miss the point'.²¹ In

¹⁶ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, pp. 44-45.

¹⁷ While Gibbs and Bolger's expanded definition is beneficial, it still suffers from a lack of clear distinction between emerging churches and other ecclesial communities. A fuller treatment of this issue is taken up in the below section introducing the research on emerging church.

¹⁸ Bob Whitesel, *Inside the Organic Church: Learning From 12 Emerging Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), p. x.

¹⁹ See: Scott Bader-Saye, "The Emerging Matrix: A New Kind of Church," *Christian Century* 121 (30 November 2004): p. 20. Theologian Robert E. Webber argues that those born after 1975 represent the centre of this emerging phenomenon—which he identified as 'the younger evangelicals'. See *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2002), p. 13. It is mainly in the early literature of emerging churches that the ages of eighteen to thirty-five are explicitly emphasized. See: Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), p. xi.

²⁰ 'Youth church' is primarily a UK designation that describes a community who 'incarnates the gospel in ecclesial forms appropriate for young people'. Stuart Murray, *After Christendom*, p. 82.

²¹ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, p. 28.

contrast to a youth church, Gibbs and Bolger insist that ‘emerging churches are missional communities arising from within postmodern culture and consisting of followers of Jesus who are seeking to be faithful in their place and time’.²² Yet, despite these concerns, Whitesel’s initial observation is accurate—young adults are often the ones populating these communities—and this specific facet has raised profound ecclesiological concerns for Graham Cray who contends that ultimately there is no theological basis for a congregation comprised of a select age bracket. He argues that the ‘very idea of *church* implies the whole called-out people of God and needs to demonstrate the breaking down of the social and cultural barriers which the cross of Christ has made possible’.²³ Cray further asserts that without appropriate theological reflection, these congregations ‘could be seen as examples of an inappropriate cultural conformism, reflecting an increasingly fragmented society and a youth culture which is tribal and specializes in temporary alliances’.²⁴ Of ongoing concern is the sustainability and future development of emerging congregations comprised of young adults. In particular, questions remain as to whether or not these emerging churches will ‘grow up’. For instance, since the *Nine O’clock Service*²⁵ began in 1985, with the stated mission of reaching out to eighteen to thirty year olds,²⁶ over two decades have passed, and much of the language still prevailing within emerging church conversations centres on a remarkably similar demographic group.

This does not mean that the emerging church phenomenon has remained static. In fact, in describing their ecclesial experimentation, many of those involved with emerging church have come together around a common account of *journey*. Throughout their discourse, images such as passage, expedition, mission, and venture

²² Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, p. 28.

²³ Graham Cray, *Youth Congregations and the Emerging Church* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2002), p. 14.

²⁴ Cray, *Youth Congregations*, p. 14.

²⁵ NOS is a now defunct worshipping community once located in Sheffield England and is widely recognized as a nascent incarnation of emerging church. For more on the relationship between the Nine O’clock Service and emerging church, see the history and development of emerging church in chapter three.

²⁶ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, p. 82.

hold places of prominence.²⁷ Yet, Phillip Harrold has surveyed the autobiographical accounts of a number of participants who have ‘journeyed’ from existing traditions into emerging church and observed that the language present in the accounts falls short of completing the *turning-to* narrative that is generally associated with successful religious conversion. Thus, he surmises that ‘struggles over doubt or moral judgment, the emotional distress associated with alienation, or the challenges of distancing oneself from a faith community’ dominate emerging church conversations to such an extent that one might rightly conclude that the journey is its own reward.²⁸

John Drane echoes this opinion when he suggests that in emerging church discourses, ‘it is often easier to discern what they are against than what they are for’.²⁹ Yet, particular voices within the wider emerging church conversation are content to accept the accusation that for them the journey is the reward. In fact Peter Rollins has argued that ‘faith embraces journey as a type of destination’ and in order to understand emerging church, one must recognize that for those involved, there is no intent to arrive.³⁰ Rollins conveys this sentiment through an anecdote in which the protagonist, when asked repeatedly where he is going, simply claims ‘away from here’. For Rollins, ‘away from here’ becomes *the* destination. Consequently, this identity through opposition raises the question: ‘Do these emerging churches have a shared point of origin?’ In other words, ‘What insight into the journey is to be gained through a sharper understanding of where precisely “here” is in the emerging church phenomenon?’ Eddie Gibbs sheds light upon this particular question when he states:

Churches and fellowship groups that describe themselves as ‘emergent’ are to be found in many Protestant traditions, and across the theological spectrum; although it must be said that the majority

²⁷ For example, Doug Pagitt writes, ‘For the better part of a decade, the Emergent way of being friends has included the notion of pilgrimage.’ Doug Pagitt, “A People of Hope: Emergent—A Generative Friendship of Missional Christians,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, ed. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2007), p. 19.

²⁸ Philip Harrold, “Deconversion in the Emerging Church,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6 (March 2006): p. 79.

²⁹ Drane does note that this particular feature is significantly more noticeable in the North American expression of emerging church than in other manifestations. Drane, “Emerging Church,” p. 7.

³⁰ Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (London: SPCK, 2006), p. 6.

would have their origins in the more evangelical and charismatic wings of the churches.³¹

Drane has added to this assessment by noting that the leaders of emerging churches will characteristically come from conservative, evangelical, or sometimes fundamentalist churches.³² To be more exact, many of the earliest emerging churches in the United States surfaced through a network of evangelical mega churches.³³ In the United Kingdom many of the alternative worship groups emerged from ‘the mainstream of charismatic-evangelical Christianity’—even though these groups were highly influenced by other worship traditions that Jonny Baker, Doug Gay, and Jenny Brown loosely define as ‘catholic’.³⁴ As the emerging church phenomenon continues its journeying, this common heritage is becoming less perceptible—particularly the affinity with the evangelical tradition—as more voices from the mainline denominations in the U.S. and the established church in the U.K. join the conversation.

As already noted, a fuller description of the history and development of emerging church is presented in chapter three of this thesis—providing an ecclesial context for the specific emerging communities studied in this research. Yet, before turning to this more thorough investigation of emerging church, I first provide an introduction to the researcher and the research that has already been conducted on this topic.

Introduction to the Researcher

My interest in this research developed out of my own personal experiences with emerging church. Although I am not directly affiliated with an emerging community and I do not contribute as a participant to the wider emerging church conversation, my exposure to this ecclesial phenomenon came well before this current research project began. Because of this exposure, I possessed a degree of empirical familiarity with emerging church (and the traditions from which they emerged)

³¹ Eddie Gibbs, “Church Responses to Culture Since 1985,” *Missiology: An International Review* 35, no. 2 (April 2007): p. 166.

³² Drane, “Emerging Church,” p. 4. This observation is confirmed by the appendix section of Gibbs and Bolger’s study that represents the history of fifty EC leaders in their own words. See Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, pp. 239-328.

³³ See Jones, “Going Somewhere Together,” p. 309, n. 1.

³⁴ Jonny Baker, Doug Gay, and Jenny Brown, *Alternative Worship* (London: SPCK, 2003), p. ix.

before starting my investigation. While the section on reflexivity in the following chapter details how this familiarity shapes the qualitative aspects of this research, at this point in the thesis I wish to provide a brief account of my own ecclesial background and history with emerging church in order to recognize the perspective from which this thesis is written.³⁵

My formative ecclesial influences came from the evangelical wings of non-denominational churches in the United States. Like many of the early U.S. participants in emerging church, I was associated with a mega-church in the late 1990s. I had just completed theological training at an evangelical seminary and had started working as an associate minister at a large, non-denominational church. Although this community was unmistakably evangelical in their theology, they maintained a ‘learning’ and open posture towards other traditions and churches. As I was joining the ministerial team at this local church, national conversations and conferences were developing around the future of the church in the U.S. In response to these national conversations, this non-denominational church was launching a new congregation with the aim of being an innovative expression of church for the next generation. Because I was one of the younger ministers at this church (26), and because of my affinity for the overall aesthetical and stylistic approaches taken by this new congregation, I was invited to join a team in starting this initiative.

Over the next four years, I would participate in and lead this experimental congregation. Since the term ‘emerging church’ was not in widespread use at this time, we did not appropriate this appellation. Still, we were deeply influenced by the wider conversation that gave birth to the emerging church phenomenon in the U.S. During this period of time, we attended regional and national conferences where we interacted with current and former U.S. emerging church voices such as Doug Pagitt, Brian McLaren, Mark Driscoll, Brad Cecil, and Dan Kimball. As a result of these interactions, our community was being exposed to and influenced by authors such as Stanley Grenz and Leonard Sweet and their work on the church in postmodern

³⁵ For more on how this impacts the qualitative aspects of this research see chapter two, pages 71-72.

contexts.³⁶ Although we experimented with more visual modes of worship and more participatory forms of preaching, much of what took place during our worship gatherings did not deviate significantly from the forms of worship common in evangelical or charismatic congregations. Indeed, a large measure of our time was given to singing contemporary worship choruses and scriptural based teaching. During my last year with this community, I became aware of alternative worship groups in the U.K. via the internet. Although I was intrigued by the visual aesthetics of their worship and the decentred, non-linear structure of their gatherings, much of what I saw taking place in these alternative worship communities was foreign to our context and I met resistance from the congregation when trying to introduce these practices.

As I aged, the community that had formed around this new congregation grew significantly younger. What was intended to be a church for the next generation had evolved into a vibrant youth and collegiate ministry. Desiring to be more closely aligned with my peers, in the early 2000s I left this congregation and took a ministerial position with the mega-church that had sponsored and launched our congregation. During my three-year tenure with this church, the primary focus of my ministerial activity was the local community. Because much of my work took place ‘outside’ the church, I was acutely aware of the criticisms surrounding evangelical churches. Many of these same criticisms had been taken up by the emerging church conversation that was developing in the U.S., and due to my previous exposure to emerging church, I was sympathetic to these concerns. What is more, as a minister within this church, I was interested in seeing our ecclesial community respond constructively to the concerns and criticism raised by the wider community and emerging churches.

Even though I carried these concerns with me into my doctoral work, my own involvement with church has undergone a noticeable shift since leaving this non-denominational mega-church. During the years spent in residency at the University

³⁶ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); and Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000).

of Edinburgh, I participated in the *Scottish Episcopal Church*. While the particular congregation I affiliated with was more ‘low church’ in their orientation—possessing some evangelical and charismatic influences—they still retained notable amounts of Anglican liturgy in not only their traditional services, but also in their contemporary services. Being marked by this encounter with the *Scottish Episcopal Church*, when I returned to the U.S. following my residency in Edinburgh, I began participating in *The Episcopal Church in the USA*. The congregation I currently worship with follows a set liturgy for their services (Rite II), and offers a more traditional approach to worship than my previous church experiences. They are also more progressive in their theology than the evangelically influenced communities with whom I had been affiliated.

Each of these encounters with different Christian communities have not only served to shape me personally, but have also determined the perspective from which I analyse church and from which I write this thesis. Again, I develop this further in the next chapter—focusing on the impact that I, as a researcher, have on the qualitative examination of emerging church—yet, before turning my attention to that matter, I conclude this chapter by introducing the research that others have done on emerging church.

Introduction to the Research on Emerging Church

The above introduction to emerging church serves to generate a more translucent representation of what can oftentimes be an opaque phenomenon. Although articulating no clear intent of arriving, these churches are indeed emerging towards something, and whether intended as a destination or not, that something is bound to present ecclesiological implications for the Christian community. Indeed, these implications are of increasing interest to the wider Christian church as evidenced by the recent attention given to this conversation by the Church of England, the Church of Scotland, and United States seminaries and divinity schools. Alongside the appearance of emerging church curriculum in a growing number of U.S. seminary courses, the Church of Scotland has designated £1.5 million to 'emerging ministries' over the last several years, and the Church of England has adopted proposals that

allow for new and fresh forms of church to emerge.³⁷ Likewise, the proliferation of literature on emerging church over the past decade also serves to underscore the timeliness of research around this topic. Yet, the bulk of the description, commentary, and analysis of this phenomenon has taken place in popular works and on the internet, receiving only limited treatment in the academy. In the popular sphere, both emerging church exponents and detractors have produced material intended to define, promulgate, defend, and criticize emerging church. In seeking to better understand the nature of emerging church, this material provides a rich context for interpreting and evaluating the ecclesial influence of this phenomenon on a popular level.³⁸ In establishing the research context for this thesis, however, I principally interface with the academic research that has been conducted on emerging communities.³⁹

Emerging Churches by Gibbs and Bolger

The previously mentioned *Emerging Churches* by Gibbs and Bolger is the standard work in the field. Their project represents five years of research conducted in both

³⁷ See: News Brief, "Church of Scotland to Invest in New Forms of Ministry and Mission," Ekklesia, <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/7147> (accessed 9 June 2008); Share: A Guide to Fresh Expressions of Church, "Bishops' Mission Orders," Fresh Expressions & Church Army, <http://www.sharetheguide.org/section5/bmo> (accessed 9 June 2008). Crucially, John and Olive Drane have recently finalized a report that was commissioned by the Church of Scotland's Ministries Council and Mission and Discipleship Council. In it they outlined their research findings on emerging initiatives within the Church of Scotland, giving particular attention to the way in which these communities relate to church structures. See: John Drane and Olive Drane, *Reformed, Reforming, Emerging, and Experimenting*, Report Commissioned By a Joint Working Party of the Ministries Council and the Mission and Discipleship Council, Church of Scotland (September 2010).

³⁸ A number of these popular works present first hand accounts of the ecclesial thought and experience of emerging church participants and critics. Examples include: Spencer Burke and Colleen Pepper, *Making Sense of Church: Eavesdropping on Emerging Conversations about God, Community, and Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003); Becky Garrison, *Rising From the Ashes: Rethinking Church* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007); Webber, ed., *Listening to Beliefs*; Tim Conder, *The Church in Transition: the Journey of Existing Churches Into the Emerging Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006); Mike Yaconelli, ed., *Stories of Emergence: Moving From Absolute to Authentic*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); Peter Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church Beyond Belief* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2008); Kester Brewin, *The Complex Christ: Signs of Emergence in the Urban Church* (London: SPCK, 2004); Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We're Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should be* (Chicago: Moody Publisher, 2008).

³⁹ Importantly, there are texts that stand at the threshold between the academic and the popular. While these works represent the fruit of actual empirical study, they are written for general audiences and stand as a popular description of emerging church conversations as opposed to academic engagement. Thus they are approached in a similar manner to other non-academic works. Examples of these include: Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008); Whitesel, *Organic Church*. Both of these works have been developed into PhD theses and so I address their contributions to the field of research in the following paragraphs.

the U.S. and the U.K. Exploring the nature of different emerging communities, Gibbs and Bolger conducted over one hundred interviews with emerging leaders, identifying the central practices that are common in these churches. Nevertheless, Gibbs and Bolger's methodology in determining which communities they base their description of emerging churches upon raises concerns over the comprehensiveness of their results. Through their research, they sought to identify the most prevalent patterns in emerging churches, and found that nine practices were common to these communities.⁴⁰ However, they elsewhere use the nine patterns as a litmus test to determine whether certain types of churches are to be considered *emerging* or not. Most notably, they eliminate what they refer to as 'Gen-X churches' from their understanding of the emerging church phenomenon because they 'see little evidence of the nine patterns' within these communities.⁴¹ This can become rather circular, as it is not entirely clear what takes prominence in their research—*describing* the practices of emerging churches or *determining* what constitutes an emerging church. Moreover, using the nine patterns as a litmus test is problematic because of their indistinctness. For instance, the activities of *identifying with the life of Jesus* and *taking part in spiritual activities* can easily be employed to describe a number of Christian communities.

Importantly, Gibbs and Bolger also situate much of their research on emerging church against the backdrop of cultural matters as opposed to the ecclesial matters that I investigate in this thesis. When analysing the relative distinctions between the church in the U.K. and the church in the U.S., the authors draw attention to wider cultural differences between the two settings, saying little about the significant ecclesial differences that exist between the two contexts. For instance, Gibbs and Bolger note that compared with the U.S., the U.K. has 'more aging urban centers' and a 'preference for club culture over guitar culture'.⁴² Even the ecclesial concerns they do raise are situated against the backdrop of culture—namely the disparity in church attendance between the U.S. and U.K., and the 'lack of an evangelical

⁴⁰ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, p. 43. These nine practices are listed in the earlier section introducing emerging church.

⁴¹ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, p. 45.

⁴² Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, p. 26.

subculture' in Britain.⁴³ To be sure, assuming that there is even an agreed upon understanding of what it means to be church in these two contexts, much less an agreed upon understanding the way the church should interface with culture is precarious and needs to be acknowledged and dealt with appropriately in order for a thesis to be ecclesiological sensitive. Therefore, I take up the ecclesiological assumptions that exist in each context in chapter six of this thesis, allowing them to inform my analysis in that chapter.

Doctoral Studies on Emerging Church

Complementing Gibbs and Bolger's broad contribution to the research on emerging church are a select number of theses and dissertations that narrow their focus to a particular emerging community or to a distinct ecclesiological subject matter. In the paragraphs that follow, I survey the doctoral work on emerging church—providing an introductory look into these studies. I deal with each in more detail in the following chapters. In chapter two I investigate the methodological approach taken in these studies, with the aim of distinguishing my own approach from theirs. I also reengage with these studies in chapter three—drawing on them to produce a more detailed history and development of the wider emerging church phenomenon.

Several of the doctoral studies on emerging church take up a particular ecclesiological issue—such as the practice of preaching in emerging churches,⁴⁴ evangelism in emerging churches,⁴⁵ and the use of space within emerging churches.⁴⁶ Barry Dean Baker and John Alan Duncan's dissertations on preaching represent a polemical approach towards emerging church that exists in certain ecclesial sectors. For instance, Baker is highly critical of emerging churches for not recognizing preaching as the pre-eminent ministry of the church, for their egalitarian approach

⁴³ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, p. 26.

⁴⁴ Barry Dean Baker, "A Critical Analysis of the Theory and Practice of Preaching in the Emerging Church Movement" (PhD Diss, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, December 2006); and John Alan Duncan, "A Critical Analysis of Preaching in the Emerging Church" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, May 2011).

⁴⁵ Woo Joon Kim, "An Evangelical Critique of the Emergent Church's Hermeneutics and Its Effects on Theology, Message, and Method of Evangelism" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, April 2012).

⁴⁶ Karyn L. Wiseman, "Grace Space: the Creation of Worship Space for the Postmodern / Emerging Church" (PhD Diss., Drew University, May 2006).

towards the role of the preacher, and for the particular theological content present in their messages.⁴⁷ Likewise, Duncan is equally critical of the preachers in emerging churches, suggesting that they locate authority in scripture, tradition, and community—instead of locating authority in scripture alone. He first argues for a ‘correspondence’ view of scripture, which maintains that the truth of scripture corresponds directly to reality, and then suggests that by displacing scripture as the sole authority, emerging preachers fail to uphold this correspondence perspective.⁴⁸ Woo Joon Kim’s dissertation on evangelism in emerging church is also highly critical of those participating in these communities. In this study, Kim offers an evangelical critique of emerging churches, arguing that they have moved away from evangelical tenets such as substitutionary theories of the atonement and the exclusivity of the Christian message of salvation. He maintains that this results in emerging churches altering this message—deemphasizing verbal proclamations of the gospel and the significance of individual conversion, which Kim suggests is fundamental to the evangelical tradition.⁴⁹ Karen Wiseman’s research on the use of space represents a non-polemical approach and suggests that emerging churches create worship spaces that ‘provide a blank canvas for décor, for art, for aesthetic and technological imaging’, which provides ‘opportunities for diverse worship arrangements’ and the ‘possibility of a transcendent experience through art and imagery’.⁵⁰ I make more extensive use of Wiseman’s study in chapter four when discussing the physical space of the emerging churches I researched for this thesis.⁵¹

Other dissertations investigate matters such as the challenges emerging churches face in resisting institutionalisation,⁵² the efforts emerging communities make in building bridges with other faiths,⁵³ and how participants in the emerging church phenomenon

⁴⁷ See: Baker, “Preaching in Emerging Church,” pp. 229-230.

⁴⁸ Duncan, “Critical Analysis of Preaching”.

⁴⁹ Kim, “Evangelical Critique”.

⁵⁰ Wiseman, “Grace Space,” p. 216.

⁵¹ See: chapter four, pages 115-116.

⁵² Josh Packard, “Organizational Structure, Religious Belief, and Resistance: the Emerging Church” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2008).

⁵³ Lloyd Chia, “Emerging Faith Boundaries: Bridge-Building, Inclusion, and the Emerging Church Movement in America” (PhD diss., University of Missouri-Columbia, 2010).

form their conceptions of God outside of existing forms of Christianity—namely through online weblogs and small egalitarian communities.⁵⁴ Investigating emerging church through the lens of organizational theory, Josh Packard argues that emerging communities effectively resist institutionalization, not by establishing their own unique patterns in distinction from traditional churches, but by opening up their newly established patterns to constant criticism and investigation.⁵⁵ Lloyd Chia's research on emerging church focuses on how these communities seek to practice inclusion and bridge-building in interfaith contexts. Contrasting the loosely bounded emerging church network with more tightly bounded institutions, Chia argues that, because less is at stake for those participating in emerging communities, they are free to form the relational connections needed to build bridges across various faith groups.⁵⁶ In Kate Simcox's research, she argues that emerging church subverts the dominant ways of knowing God by relying on community knowledge and relationships as a means for knowing God. Simcox argues that these communities sidestep the mainstream Christian message by altering forms of communication and moving away from hierarchal forms of leadership.⁵⁷ While these above studies provide rich insight into various practices of emerging churches, and serve to thicken the description of this ecclesial conversation, they only profile the emerging church phenomenon in the United States and do not significantly traverse outside the boundaries of their primary enquiry.

Finally, the doctoral work of Bob Whitsel, Tony Jones, and Terrance Steele makes a substantial contribution to the research on emerging church being carried out in the United States.⁵⁸ Both Whitsel and Jones have grounded their scholarship in

⁵⁴ Kate D. Simcox, "Performing Postmodern Christian: Communication in the Emerging Church and the Renegotiation of Divine Knowledge" (PhD Diss., Bowling Green State University, 2005).

⁵⁵ Packard, "Organizational Structure".

⁵⁶ Chia, "Emerging Faith Boundaries".

⁵⁷ Simcox, "Performing Postmodern Christian".

⁵⁸ Robert B. Whitesel, "Recurring Patterns of Organic Churches: An Analysis of Twelve Emerging Congregations" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, May 2009); Anthony Hawthorne Jones, "The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement in Practical Theological Perspective" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2011) [Kindle version: Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (2011)]; and Terrance Steele, "The Missiology of the Emerging Church in Portland, Oregon" (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2012).

empirical investigations into emerging communities and have made constructive efforts to identify recurring patterns and core practices within these churches. Whitsel's research on twelve communities revealed the presences of fourteen recurring patterns. These ranged from the emphasis emerging churches place on experimentation, the arts, small groups, authenticity and question asking, to the focus these communities place on the disenfranchised and the periphery. As for Jones' research, he identifies the way emerging communities embrace, spurn or redefine traditional ecclesial practices and doctrines. For instance, he highlights the more 'open source' approach to preaching that takes place in emerging churches and their unique Eucharistic practices that exist as a pastiche of various ecclesial traditions. Through this research, both Whitsel and Jones offer important insights into the communal life of emerging churches—with Jones putting forward a description of emerging church ecclesiology that is primarily concerned with nurturing the relationships of those within the church to one another in Christ and to God through God's Spirit. Terrance Steele also grounds his scholarship in an empirical investigation into emerging communities. His research focuses on the missional strategies of the emerging community in Portland, Oregon. Steele found that emerging churches in this area centred their missional efforts around ministering to young adults in their twenties and to meeting the physical needs of underprivileged individuals in their community. When turning their focus to international projects, these communities engaged in efforts to combat human trafficking and to assist orphans and victims of HIV / AIDS. In evaluating the effectiveness of these missional strategies, Steele focused on conversions, and failed to find evidence that these emerging churches had a significant spiritual impact on the non-Christian community in Portland or on the non-Christian community engaged through their international projects.⁵⁹

Within the U.K., several doctoral studies have embarked upon an exploration of emerging churches as well. The first, undertaken by John Hall, is an investigation into three youth congregations in Britain, demonstrating how these churches emphasize the concrete human community and the daily encounter of God. Crucially, Hall notes that when he initiated his study, 'youth churches' was the

⁵⁹ Steele, "Missiology of Emerging Church," pp. 271, 273.

preferred nomenclature in the U.K. for describing the emerging phenomenon. This developed however, and during the research the terminology changed to ‘niche church’ and by the completion of his writing, ‘youth church’ was beginning to be subsumed under the rubric ‘emerging church’.⁶⁰ Several of Hall’s findings are of ecclesiological significance, particularly how these congregations ‘demonstrated an emerging post-Christendom ecclesiology’ by focusing on the marginalized, seeking to empower rather than hold power, and by rejecting a traditional religious lifestyle.⁶¹ Hall concludes that these churches do not represent a renewal of existing forms, but rather a ‘fresh start’.⁶² Another thesis that focuses on emerging churches in the UK is Janine Paden Morgan’s work on Eucharistic practices in emerging communities.⁶³ In her work, Morgan argues that as emerging church ritual moves towards the privileging of sensory-centred forms of worship over word-centered forms of worship, the Eucharistic meal becomes critical in providing strong biblical and theological footings for these communities.

Certainly the most in depth study of a single emerging church in the U.K. is Corey Labanow’s research, which seeks to ‘describe and understand in detail one self-ascribed *emerging church*’, identifying the central theological concern that stands as the primary focus of that congregation.⁶⁴ This particular thesis has subsequently been published as *Evangelicalism and Emerging Church: A Congregational Study of a Vineyard Church*.⁶⁵ Labanow’s study revealed the challenge of this emerging church’s renegotiation of their theological identity. Specifically, participants in this congregation have ‘decisively moved on from something—in most cases, conservative evangelicalism—but have not yet arrived at another definite mode of

⁶⁰ Hall, “Youth Congregation,” p. 391.

⁶¹ Hall, “Youth Congregation,” p. 426.

⁶² Hall, “Youth Congregation,” p. 427.

⁶³ Janine Paden Morgan, “Emerging Eucharist: Formative Ritualizing in British Emerging Churches” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2009).

⁶⁴ Labanow also considered how the ways this particular church reflected upon their particular theological question ‘might be transformational for other churches and related disciplines of theology.’ Corey E. Labanow, “The Challenges of Reconstruction: a Congregational Study of an Emerging Church” (PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2006), p. 81.

⁶⁵ Corey E. Labanow, *Evangelicalism and Emerging Church: a Congregational Study of a Vineyard Church* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

being'.⁶⁶ Correlating well with other descriptions of the emerging church phenomenon, this study adds depth and texture to much of the conversation, as well as suggesting the need for future research into this varied collection of churches and individuals. Specifically, Labanow recognized that the wider emerging church phenomenon manifests similar themes to the one he uncovered, yet the way different congregations work out these themes is very diverse. He concluded that 'if the wider church is to take [emerging church] seriously and bring them more fully to the table of dialogue, more research will need to be done on congregations identifying with this network'.⁶⁷

Similar to Labanow's doctoral work, Steve Taylor focused his research around a single ecclesial community.⁶⁸ His investigation centred on an alternative worship community in Auckland, New Zealand. Taylor's research revealed that the participants in this community had emerged from the Evangelical, Pentecostal, or Charismatic wings of the churches and considered themselves 'decentred' from religious authority structures. These participants also articulated a deep connection to contemporary culture through artefacts such as books, film, and radio. Taylor's study finds that these religiously decentred and culturally connected participants found their experiences with this alternative worship community helpful because of its emphasis on honest and participatory community, its creative and holistic spirituality, and its engagement with contemporary culture. In situating this community against the backdrop of wider cultural shifts—that include the fragmentation of individual identity and the fragmentation of community—Taylor questions how this already decentred, alternative worship community can form community and develop relationships in an increasingly fragmented and decentred context. In attempting to understand their response to this challenge, Taylor draws on the work of Michel de Certeau and his notion of 'making do', arguing that this alternative worship community is 'making do' by poaching fragments from their contemporary culture and the Christian tradition. These fragments include (1) locating authority in the local community, or what Taylor calls communitarian

⁶⁶ Labanow, "Challenges of Reconstruction," p 217.

⁶⁷ Labanow, "Challenges of Reconstruction," p. 249.

⁶⁸ Steve Taylor, "A New Way of Being Church: Approach to Cityside Baptist Church as Christian Faith 'Making Do' in a Postmodern World" (PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2004).

hermeneutic, (2) creative liturgical activity such as labyrinths, art images, and storytelling, and (3) accepting the partiality of a living Christian faith that samples practices from both the gospel and culture. Taylor argues that this ‘making do’ represents a new form of ecclesial community, and thus alternative worship offers an effective way of being church and being Christian in fragmented, postmodern contexts.⁶⁹

Carson’s Critique of Emerging Church

The most significant critique of the emerging church phenomenon is Don Carson’s work, which argues that emerging church’s evaluation of the present climate tends towards a reductionistic interpretation of modernity and a condemnation of confessional Christianity, and thus reveals their theological shallowness and their intellectual incoherence.⁷⁰ While Carson’s work exists as an important study for critically evaluating the emerging church phenomenon, it remains limited in the scope of its interaction with the diverse network. Focusing too narrowly on Brian McLaren in the U.S. and Steve Chalke in the UK (who in fact denies being involved in emerging church), Carson rests much of his analysis of the entire network on the epistemological concerns raised by the writings of these two figures.⁷¹

Consequently, one needs to be cautious in employing Carson’s work as a fully rounded critique of the wider emerging church conversation, as it does not take seriously the diverse, particular and localized nature of this phenomenon.

Journal Articles and Chapters on Emerging Church

In addition to the more sizeable projects above, a number of edited volumes, journal articles, and book chapters also contribute to the research on emerging churches.

⁶⁹ Taylor, “New Way of Being Church,” p. 356.

⁷⁰ Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, pp. 57-83. For another critique of emerging church that is more sympathetic and seeks to foster dialogue between emerging and traditional church, see Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2009).

⁷¹ This observation of Carson’s critique comes from Scot McKnight, “What is the Emerging Church?,” (paper presented at the Fall Contemporary Issues Conference, Westminster Theological Seminary, 26-27 October 2006), <http://www.foolishsage.com/wp-content/uploads/McKnight%20-%20What%20is%20the%20Emerging%20Church.pdf> (accessed 18 April 2007), p. 5.

These endeavours range from descriptive and analytical,⁷² to highly critical and polemical.⁷³ Of particular importance to my thesis however is the research that focuses around the intersection of emerging churches and ecclesiology. Several of these works embark upon an investigation into the ecclesiality of emerging church—that is, they seek to ask and answer the question: Are emerging churches a true and authentic expression of church?⁷⁴ Similar to these lines, attempts have also been made to assess how well emerging church is faring in addressing the ecclesiological concerns raised by postmodernity.⁷⁵ Even more significant to this thesis are articles and chapters suggesting ways in which emerging churches are contributing to particular traditions in the wider Church. For instance, one work seeks to elucidate the emerging church's contribution to evangelical ecclesiology, citing emerging church's potential to re-shape ecclesiology through 'its emphases on worship, liturgy, sacraments, and a return to the classical Christian tradition.'⁷⁶ To this assessment, works such as Robert Webber's ecclesial observation should be added. Webber suggests that emerging churches 'have turned away from the megachurch movement to find a visible smaller fellowship of believers drawn from all the traditions that affirms the whole church and seeks to embody Christ's presence in a particular neighbourhood, often in the city.'⁷⁷ While these works do consider the contributions

⁷² In addition to articles already cited in this chapter see: Jeff Keuss, "The Emergent Church and Neo-Correlational Theology After Tillich, Schleiermacher and Browning," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 4 (2008): 450-461; John Bolt, "An Emerging Critique of the Postmodern, Evangelical Church: A Review Essay," *Calvin Theological Journal* 41, no. 2 (November 2006): pp. 205-221.

⁷³ Examples of these articles include: Mark Driscoll, "A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church," *Criswell Theological Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2006): pp. 87-93; Larry D. Pettegrew, "Evangelicalism, Paradigms, and the Emerging Church," *Master's Seminary Journal* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2006): pp. 159-175; Scott R. Smith, "Some Suggestions for Brian McLaren (and His Critics)," *Criswell Theological Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2006): pp. 67-85.

⁷⁴ See George Lings, "Unravelling the DNA of Church: How Can We Know That What is Emerging is 'Church'?", *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6, no. 1 (March 2006): pp. 104-116; Ian Mobsby, "Emerging and Fresh Expressions of Church: How Are They Authentically Church and Anglican?" (MA diss., Anglia Ruskin University, 2006).

⁷⁵ See: Louise Nelstrop and Martin Percy, eds., *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008); Scot McKnight, Peter Rollins, Kevin Cocoran, Jason Clark, *Church in the Present Tense* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2011); John S. Hammett, "An Ecclesiological Assessment of the Emerging Church," *Criswell Theological Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2006): pp. 29-49.

⁷⁶ Leanne Van Dyk, "The Church in Evangelical Theology and Practice," in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel Treier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 132-134.

⁷⁷ Webber, *Younger Evangelicals*, p. 122. Webber also stresses the influence that missional church thinkers such as Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch have had on emerging churches. 'In this model the local church living its mission in the world is the most crucial form of evangelism.' p. 134.

emerging communities make their parent traditions, they are largely speculative in nature and not based upon empirical study.

While the above projects offer an enriching investigation into important dimensions of emerging church, this present thesis can be differentiated by the question being asked and the methodological approach taken in investigating this question. In the next chapter, I clarify the research question that undergirds this thesis and outline the methodological approach guiding my investigation of emerging church. In doing so, I revisit the various doctoral studies that have been carried out on emerging church—distinguishing my own work from theirs.

Chapter 2: Methodological Approach

In chapter one I put forward an overview of the wider emerging church phenomenon, providing a contextual backdrop for this thesis. In the current chapter, I give an account of the methodological approach I take in researching this phenomenon. This methodological account first considers the situation under examination in this thesis, and brings into focus the specific question that directs my research. I then argue that the field of practical theology is the appropriate discipline in which to situate this thesis. This discussion of practical theology traces the history and recent developments in this field, putting forward the specific approach to practical theology that is taken in this research. I then conclude this chapter by considering a number of other methodological approaches to emerging church. This comparative discussion highlights the particular qualitative methods selected for this thesis, how the data was generated and analysed, and how this relates to the approach to practical theology argued for in this thesis.

Understanding the Research Situation

My initial research question was born out of curiosity and concern. Given the early rhetoric (particularly in the U.S.) that surrounded emerging church—surfacing from both proponents and detractors—these emerging communities appeared to be either pointing us to the future of the Christian Church, or taking us one step closer to the Christian Church’s demise.⁷⁸ With one of these possibilities at stake, developing a thorough understanding of emerging church became a critical concern. Nevertheless, several crucial ‘gaps’ appeared in the discussions surrounding emerging church. First, as evidenced by the polarizing nature of the abovementioned rhetoric, there was a need for a study that investigated the contribution that emerging church was making to existing church. In other words, I was curious to understand what it was that existing churches could learn from those who are living out church in emerging communities? Importantly, this line of inquiry avoided the more extreme portrayals of emerging church present in the rhetoric, as it sought to identify the constructive aspects of emerging communities—without exaggerating or trivializing the import of emerging church. A second ‘gap’ in the early discussions surrounding emerging

⁷⁸ See for example: D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant With the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005), and Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008).

church was that, as I have already indicated, much of the work done on emerging church was theoretical in nature, and often neglected the concrete expressions of actual emerging communities.⁷⁹ As a result, assessing what existing churches could learn from these emerging churches required a good measure of speculation regarding the routine life of these communities and the experiences that those participating in emerging church found meaningful. Thus an empirically based study investigating what it is that existing churches could learn from concrete expressions of emerging church was needed in order to remedy this limitation.

Conducting empirically based research opens a number of critical questions relating to choice of method and modes of analysis, and as John Swinton and Harriet Mowat suggest, these are deeply related to the epistemological assumptions of the researcher and the line of enquiry being pursued in the study.⁸⁰ In fact, Swinton and Mowat argue that, ‘the choice of method *depends entirely* on the research question and the situation under examination’.⁸¹ With this in mind, I now turn my attention towards clarifying the particular situation I am examining and focusing the question of my research.

The Situation Under Examination

While there is an increasing amount of research being conducted around emerging communities, the recent and diverse nature of this ecclesial phenomenon creates a situation where ‘emerging church’ still remains a perplexing subject matter. As such, qualitative enquiries into this field are more desirable than quantitative. In the social sciences, the relationship between qualitative approaches and quantitative

⁷⁹ Again, as indicated in the first chapter, there are important exceptions to these theoretically orientated works. The more empirically based studies are considered in more detail in the below section entitled ‘Methodological Approaches to Emerging Church’.

⁸⁰ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), p. 55.

⁸¹ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 55. [emphasis added]

approaches has engendered an on-going debate.⁸² Rose Damaris notes that this relationship is often presented in a dualistic manner, suggesting that these approaches are deeply rooted in differing epistemological positions.⁸³ Even though she contends that these dichotomies are overly simplistic, and can at times be unhelpful as they limit the possibility of ‘developing research strategies that recognize the potential complementarity of certain quantitative and qualitative techniques’, Damaris does acknowledge that the epistemological differences between the two are ‘real, and do lead to different types of questions being asked in relation to the same broad research topic’.⁸⁴ While I deal in more detail with the epistemological foundations that underlie this particular research project in the below section entitled ‘Epistemological Position’, at this stage it is necessary for me to call attention to the broad epistemological distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research and to reveal why qualitative methods were chosen for this thesis.

In their work on qualitative research in practical theology, Swinton and Mowat call attention to the distinction between *nomothetic knowledge* and *ideographic knowledge*.⁸⁵ In the case of the former model of knowledge, the researcher is attempting to access reality via the scientific method. In this approach, in order for a piece of knowledge to be ‘true’, it must be falsifiable, replicable, and generalizable. Ideographic models on the other hand, assume that meaningful knowledge can be accessed through ‘unique, non-replicable experiences’.⁸⁶ When considering the particular research situation of emerging church, the kind of knowledge I seek is more ideographic in nature. As Swinton and Mowat argue, ‘a good deal of religious

⁸² Steinar Kvale, *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), p. 68. Kvale suggests that even though the following studies have attempted to defuse the debate, they have had little impact. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, “The Controversy Over Detailed Interviews—An Offer for Negotiation,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 8, (1944): 36-80; Charles S. Reichardt and Thomas D. Cook, “Beyond Qualitative Versus Quantitative Methods,” in *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Evaluation Research*, ed. Thomas D. Cook and Charles S. Reichardt, (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979); and Finn Tschudi, “Do Qualitative and Quantitative Methods Require Different Approaches to Validity?,” in *Issues of Validity in Qualitative Research*, ed. Steinar Kvale, (Lund, Sweden: Studentlitteratur, 1989).

⁸³ Rose Damaris, “Revisiting Feminist Research Methodologies: A Working Paper,” *Status of Women Canada* (6 July 2001): p. 3, <http://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/SW21-142-2001E.pdf> (accessed 15 June 2012).

⁸⁴ Damaris, “Feminist Research Methodologies”.

⁸⁵ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, pp. 40-45.

⁸⁶ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 43.

and spiritual truth is not falsifiable and therefore not considered to be true or at least verifiably true within [the nomothetic] model of knowledge'.⁸⁷ Since this project is concerned with the concrete experiences of those participating in emerging church—experiences that are certainly religious and spiritual in nature—falsifiability is problematic, and thus the kind of knowledge being sought in this research is not nomothetic. Furthermore, the knowledge sought in this research is not a type that can be accessed through replicable experiments, which seek to test theories or predict behaviours. Instead, the knowledge sought in this research—such as understanding those things emerging church participants find meaningful in their ecclesial life—is discoverable principally through the unrepeated events and particular experiences of an ecclesial community, and thus ideographic in nature. The reason for underscoring the distinction between nomothetic and ideographic knowledge is to emphasize why qualitative methods were chosen over quantitative methods in this thesis. In social scientific research, quantitative methods are customarily linked with nomothetic knowledge, whereas qualitative methods are associated with ideographic knowledge.⁸⁸ Since the knowledge I seek in this research is more ideographic in nature, I chose to take a qualitative approach to the empirical research into emerging church.

Focusing a Research Question

Unlike quantitative research, which commonly begins with a particular hypothesis and then seeks to test that hypothesis through empirical examination, qualitative research starts with a particular situation needing further investigation, and then, through the research process, a hypothesis is developed.⁸⁹ For this reason, Swinton and Mowat suggest that it is 'both usual and acceptable to pose a general question or to lay out an initial observation which later becomes the general field of study'.⁹⁰

The development of a formal research question then emerges as the researcher interacts with the relevant literature and generated data.

⁸⁷ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 41.

⁸⁸ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 44.

⁸⁹ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 52.

⁹⁰ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 52.

In the case of this research on emerging church, the initial observations concerning the complex and contested nature of the emerging phenomenon lead me to ask the general question of what it was that existing churches could learn from emerging communities. While this general question served as a sufficient catalyst for initiating the research by giving the investigation into emerging churches an ecclesiological focus, as the thesis developed, the scope of the question proved to be too far-reaching. As I noted earlier, ideographic knowledge generated through qualitative research does not possess the same degree of generalizability as nomothetic knowledge. Therefore, as Swinton and Mowat explain:

The task of qualitative research is not to seek to *explain* the world in ways that will make sense across cultures to all reasonable people at any moment in history. Rather the task of qualitative research is to describe reality in ways which enable us to understand the world differently and in understanding differently begin to act differently.⁹¹

Consequently, attempting to make ecclesiological proposals for the whole of the Christian Church based upon the particular experiences of those within emerging communities exceeds the parameters of a qualitative inquiry. Yet, as qualitative researchers describe particular situations, their findings ‘should resonate with the experiences of others in similar circumstances’, and ‘this resonance should invoke a sense of identification with those who share something of the experience’.⁹² Where this sense of identification is present, there is an opportunity for a degree of transferability beyond the immediate situation. Swinton and Mowat call this ‘transformative resonance’ and suggest that qualitative researchers can offer insights to those who, while remaining outside the particular situation, share similar circumstances and experience related phenomena. For the purposes of this thesis, this means concentrating my attention on the issues this research raises for emerging churches and those Christian communities most closely related to them—namely the parent traditions from which these churches emerged. In order to do this, I must shrink the scope of the initial question to focus not on the contributions that emerging churches make to the wider Christian community, but rather on the contributions that emerging churches could make to the Christian communities from which they emerged.

⁹¹ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, pp. 45-46.

⁹² Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, pp. 47.

Thus, the research question I pursue in this thesis is: What contributions might emerging churches make to their parent communities' understanding of what it is to be church? Aspects to be highlighted through this more narrow approach are (a) Why those in emerging church left these traditions, (b) What they find meaningful in their emerging communities, and (c) the contribution these emerging communities might then make to their parent communities.

Practical Theology as a Location for this Research

Thus far, I have argued for the importance of an empirically based study of emerging church. I have also argued that the complex nature of emerging church invites a qualitative approach to this subject. Yet, the research question put forward in this thesis has within it an ecclesiological dimension, and thus the focus of this research is theological in nature. In striving to situate the qualitative dimensions of this research within a proper theological discourse, I look to the discipline of practical theology as a fruitful location for this thesis.

Development of Practical theology and Contemporary Approaches

Making sense of the diverse field of practical theology represents a formidable challenge. Swinton and Mowatt acknowledge that it is an intricate and complex enterprise that includes practitioners from across the theological spectrum, occupying a diversity of methodological positions.⁹³ Indeed, Edward Farley argues that 'practical theology never was a single, unified theological science', and even when earlier manifestations of the discipline took the form of 'applied theology', it was still 'a *collection* of studies pertinent to the discrete tasks of ministry'.⁹⁴ In the sections below, I trace the development of this diverse discipline from its beginnings as applied theology to the diverging methods present in contemporary models. In doing so, I set forth the approach to practical theology that will be adopted for this thesis.

⁹³ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, pp. v-vi.

⁹⁴ Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 106. Emphasis added.

Practical Theology as Applied Theology

As a modern academic discipline, practical theology can trace its beginnings back to eighteenth century ministerial training taking place within German universities. Indeed, German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher is conventionally recognized as ‘the father of practical theology’ due to his categorization of theological studies into the distinct disciplines of philosophical, historical, and practical theology.⁹⁵ Yet, even before Schleiermacher solidified these categories, a recognized syllabus for theological education was emerging in German universities. This emerging syllabus sought to group texts according to their emphases—theological texts relating to matters of dogma and belief were categorized into one group, while texts relating to matters of practice and conduct were categorized into another.⁹⁶ As Elaine Graham argues, this move established a boundary between ‘theoretical knowledge’ and ‘applied knowledge’ in theological study. With this division in place, sub-disciplines such as homiletics, pastoral care, liturgics, and catechesis all found their place within the ‘applied knowledge’ grouping of the theological curriculum.⁹⁷ According to Farley, ‘practical theology’ became the term associated with the above ministerial or clerical disciplines, and thus the term ‘practical theology’ was also associated with the applied disciplines in the twofold division between theoretical and applied curriculum.⁹⁸

Of course, as Helen Cameron and others point out, suggesting that practical theology finds its origins in the post-Enlightenment and post-Reformation efforts of German universities and Friedrich Schleiermacher is suspect, given their premise that ‘the Christian community has, in some sense, never been without “practical theology”’.⁹⁹ Indeed, that the earliest gathered Christian communities were engaging in some form of practical theology certainly seems to be the case. Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward make this claim explicit in outlining the historical periods

⁹⁵ See: Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Mowbray, 1996), p. 59; and Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney, Clare Watkins, *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010), p.19.

⁹⁶ Graham, *Transforming Practice*, p. 58.

⁹⁷ Graham, *Transforming Practice*, p. 58. See also: Farley, *Theologia*, p. 78.

⁹⁸ Farley, *Theologia*, p. 78.

⁹⁹ Cameron, et. al., *God in Practice*, p.19.

of practical theology, arguing that the earliest period of practical theology developed within Christian communities during the first two centuries of Christianity as ‘members were inspired by a concern to build up one another in the faith’.¹⁰⁰ What is more, Graham, Walton, and Ward do not make mention of Schleiermacher’s contribution to the development of practical theology until after they point out the emergence of ‘moral theology’ in Christian communities—whereby ‘the practice of pastoral care was linked to sacramental ministries’ following the institutionalization of apostolic ministries under Church authorities.¹⁰¹ Still, there is good reason for tracing the modern field of practical theology back to Schleiermacher. As Cameron and others explain, doing so allows for:

a narration of practical theology in terms of its modern development through a focus on ministerial training, into its significant interdisciplinary relationship with psychotherapy and counseling, into the contemporary concerns with Christian community and the transformation of society toward peace and justice. This is a story which can usefully be understood as a shift from the therapeutic to the hermeneutic.¹⁰²

The notable shift in practical theology that Cameron and others are referring to has occurred over the past several decades and has been helpfully mapped by Elaine Graham.¹⁰³

As already indicated, theological studies in Schleiermacher’s schema consisted of the three sub-disciplines of philosophical, historical, and practical theology. Although Schleiermacher sought to maintain a basic unity between theory and practice by identifying these sub-disciplines as ‘ecclesial practices’, and giving practical theology an equal partnership with the other branches of theology, his system actually privileged the ‘fixed truths’ and ‘established modes of enquiry and verification’ of the philosophical and historical theological disciplines.¹⁰⁴ By

¹⁰⁰ Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005), p. 2.

¹⁰¹ Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection*, p. 2.

¹⁰² Cameron, et. al., *God in Practice*, p.19.

¹⁰³ Graham, *Transforming Practice*, pp. 56-82. See also: Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection*, pp. 2-5.

¹⁰⁴ Graham, *Transforming Practice*, pp. 59-60.

paralleling *philosophical*, *historical*, and *practical* theology with the functions of *normative*, *descriptive*, and *prescriptive* respectively, Schleiermacher's schema ultimately reinforced the traditional hierarchy of theology, whereby philosophical understanding becomes the 'pure' knowledge, from which 'applied' or practical knowledge flows.¹⁰⁵ The crucial implication of this hierarchy is that *practical* theology becomes better labeled as *applied* theology, where ministerial practice is a place for the outworking of theological reflection rather than a source for theological reflection. Just as significantly, Schleiermacher situates the whole of theology within ecclesial borders and argues that the purpose of theology is service to the Church.¹⁰⁶ This means that the Church itself becomes the reference point for all truth-claims in the study of theology, and thus without an independent criterion to assess the nature and mission of the Church itself, there is no possibility for the Church to gain insights from non-theological streams of knowledge.¹⁰⁷ This observation is significant because in more recent decades, one of the chief concerns of practical theology has been the relationship between the Church and non-theological streams of knowledge. Yet, this more modern understanding of practical theology developed slowly, moving away from the influence of Schleiermacher's schema incrementally.

Practical Theology's Therapeutic Turn

Graham outlines this development, noting that in the 150 years following Schleiermacher, practical theology was primarily focused on the activities and practices of the pastoral office, supplying not only 'hints and helps' for the ordained minister, but also providing a 'kind of pragmatic expertise' for clergy attempting to increase their status to match the professional standing of their peers in medicine, law, and business.¹⁰⁸ During this period of professionalization, the discipline of practical theology became increasingly aware of the value of non-theological sources of knowledge, and the important role they could play in effective pastoral ministry. For instance, Graham notes that the rising popularity of modern psychologies and psychotherapies brought with it an 'enthusiasm for these new disciplines', and 'many

¹⁰⁵ Graham, *Transforming Practice*, p. 59.

¹⁰⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *A Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, trans. Terrence T. Tice, third ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. 4-7.

¹⁰⁷ Graham, *Transforming Practice*, pp. 59, 61.

¹⁰⁸ Graham, *Transforming Practice*, pp. 61-62.

working pastors became interested in these new sciences of personality, and observed their potential benefits in the service of Christian ministry'.¹⁰⁹ Ultimately, disciplines such as psychology were seen to be of such value in ministerial practice, that they became embedded within the field of pastoral training, resulting in the emergence of sub-disciplines such as Clinical Pastoral Education and Pastoral Counseling. This represents a major phase of practical theology's development, and as Graham, Walton, and Ward suggest, it marks 'a turn to secular sources of therapeutic knowledge'.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, this therapeutic phase established the interdisciplinary nature of practical theology, and as such, the subsequent descriptions of this discipline are certain to mention this aspect. For example, Cameron and others note that 'practical theology is consistently presented as necessarily interdisciplinary', and suggest that 'the reasons for this interdisciplinarity can be found at the motivational heart of practical theology—to be able to speak truthfully and meaningfully about human realities'.¹¹¹

Emergence and Evolution of Critical Correlation

One of the more influential figures during the therapeutic stage of practical theology's development was the prominent protestant theologian Paul Tillich. Tillich, who was deeply interested in both theology and psychology, sought to develop a way to bring the insights from these two fields into correspondence with one another. The result of this effort was a model of 'critical correlation', which sought to use human experience as means for generating the themes and questions to which theology and the Christian tradition must respond and answer. Tillich, in the first volume of his systematic theology argues that this method of correlation 'explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence'.¹¹² He argued that in his method of correlation, systematic theology 'makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions'.¹¹³ Although Tillich's model

¹⁰⁹ Graham, *Transforming Practice*, p. 64.

¹¹⁰ Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection*, p. 2.

¹¹¹ Cameron, et. al., *God in Practice*, p. 29.

¹¹² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 51.

¹¹³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, p. 62.

of critical correlation opened the way for a fruitful conversation between theology and contemporary situations, more recent assessments of his work have called into question the nature of this relationship. First, as Graham asserts, the conversation that Tillich facilitated through his critical correlation was between psychological theory and systematic theology—both of which were abstracted from concrete pastoral care.¹¹⁴ As a result of this abstraction Tillich’s critical correlation ultimately alienated the theological enterprise from actual human experience.¹¹⁵ Second, the conversation between theology and the human situation in Tillich’s model appeared to move in one direction—with the human situation raising the questions, and the Christian tradition providing the answers. In Swinton and Mowatt’s assessment,

Tillich’s model seems to assume that it is somehow possible to distil ‘pure theological truth’ which can then be applied to the questions produced by the world without these questions in turn challenging the theological response. His method is a uni-directional model of reflection which applies Christian truth to the world without allowing the world to significantly question particular interpretations of that truth.¹¹⁶

Responding to the uni-directional nature of Tillich’s model of critical correlation, subsequent theologians such as David Tracy sought to develop this conversation between the Christian tradition and contemporary situations in a bi-directional fashion—arguing for ‘mutually critical correlations’ between Christian tradition and contemporary situations. In contrast to Tillich, who suggested that the contemporary situation *asked* the questions to which the Christian tradition then *responded*, Tracy argued for the correlation ‘between both the questions *and* responses of both phenomenon... not simply “questions” from one pole and “responses” from the other’.¹¹⁷ Thus, for Tracy, practical theology becomes ‘the mutually critical correlation of the interpreted theory and praxis of the Christian fact and the interpreted theory and praxis of the contemporary situation’.¹¹⁸ While this definition

¹¹⁴ Graham, *Transforming Practice*, p. 71.

¹¹⁵ This division between practice and theology continues to persist in many correlational approaches, and I discuss this in the below section entitled, ‘Moving Beyond Correlation’.

¹¹⁶ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 78.

¹¹⁷ David Tracy, “Foundations of Practical Theology,” in *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World*, ed. Don S. Browning, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 63.

¹¹⁸ Tracy, “Foundations of Practical Theology,” p. 76.

introduces a number of critical components in Tracy's model—such as the hermeneutical and transformational nature of practical theology—for the purposes of this current discussion, I wish to highlight the way in which the interpretation of the Christian tradition is opened up to critique and possible reformulation. In this revised model of correlation, contemporary situations gain equal footing in the conversation and, as opposed to simply raising questions to which the Christian tradition responds, have within themselves the possibility of responding to questions raised by the Christian tradition.

Challenges of Contemporary Correlational Models

Following Tracy's method, much of practical theology employed some form of revised correlation. This can be seen in the work of prominent practical theologians like Don Browning, who argued that practical theology 'critically correlates both questions and answers found in the Christian faith with questions and implied answers found in various secular perspectives (the human sciences, the arts) on common human experiences'.¹¹⁹ Additionally, the revised method of correlation 'forms the basic dynamic within various models of the pastoral cycle'.¹²⁰ This cycle—which operates as a popular mechanism in practical theology—varies somewhat amongst practical theologians, but in a commonly used form it follows a four-fold progression from *experience* to *exploration*, to *reflection*, and then to *action*.¹²¹ The starting point for the pastoral cycle is the present situation (experience), which, when disrupted by an internal or external element, requires further exploration and reflection. According to Ballard and Pritchard, it is in these exploration and reflection stages that critical correlation most often occurs—as the situation is analyzed and brought into conversation with the beliefs and values of the individuals and communities involved.¹²² Referring to these stages as the 'boiler

¹¹⁹ Don S. Browning, "Pastoral Theology in a Pluralistic Age," in *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World*, ed. Don S. Browning, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 192. See also Browning's subsequent work: Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

¹²⁰ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 79. Helen Cameron (et. al.) and Pete Ward also suggest that correlation is a key ingredient in the pastoral cycle. See: Cameron, et. al., *God in Practice*, p. 29; and Pete Ward, *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church* (London: SCM Press, 2008), p. 36.

¹²¹ This model of the pastoral cycle is from: Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 77-78.

¹²² Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, p. 82.

room’ of practical theology, they note that this discipline is essentially dialogical in nature, bringing a number of elements into critical conversation with one another.

Although an accepted and widely used approach in practical theology, revised models of correlation raise a number of methodological challenges for practical theologians—particularly for those working within Christian frameworks that possess a ‘high’ view of theology. Cameron (et. al.) explains the difficulty well, arguing that an approach to correlation that does not privilege Christian tradition,

is in some tension with those strands of Christianity—both Catholic and Evangelical (and Barthian)—which work with a ‘high’ theology of revelation, presupposing that, ultimately, the most authentic (because divinely inspired) account of reality is to be found in the traditions, languages and practices of faith.¹²³

Navigating this tension then becomes a crucial component in methodologies of correlation. Swinton and Mowat’s work on practical theology and qualitative research offers an example of one such way practical theologians have sought to address the challenge.¹²⁴ Their mutual critical correlation model seeks to bring the various tasks of the practical theologian into critical dialogue with particular insights derived from other disciplines, such as the social sciences.¹²⁵ According to Swinton and Mowat, the task of the practical theologian is to interpret how human beings encounter their world—holding in tension the present situation, the Christian tradition and other sources of knowledge. As with other revised correlation models, each dialogue partner (i.e. the present situation, the Christian tradition and other sources of knowledge) receives equal weighting in the research process. For these authors, this move raises the question: ‘How can a system of knowledge created by human beings challenge a system of knowledge that claims to be given by God?’¹²⁶

¹²³ Cameron, et. al., *God in Practice*, p. 30.

¹²⁴ More recently, Swinton has offered the notion of ‘hospitality’ as a better metaphor than ‘correlation’ for summarizing the relationship between theology and the social sciences. He argues that correlation can ‘indicate and work with the fact that the two things bear a reciprocal or mutual relation’. Yet the concepts of reciprocity and relationship cannot always account for the differing ontological or epistemological weight one may wish to give to theology (or to the social sciences). For Swinton, ‘hospitality’ requires theology to respect and value the voice of the social sciences, without disavowing or ‘dumbing down’ its own voice (and vice versa). John Swinton, “Where is Your Church?: Moving Towards a Hospitable and Sactified Ethnography,” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 91-92.

¹²⁵ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 76.

¹²⁶ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 83.

Indeed, John Milbank in his work *Theology and Social Theory* argues that, contrary to the perceived neutrality of the social sciences, this discourse ‘must be located within the history of “the secular”, its attempts to legitimate itself, and to “cope” with the phenomenon of religion’.¹²⁷ Thus, for Milbank, social scientific visions of society and history have sought to supplant theological visions, and therefore do not actually operate as ‘neutral, rational, universal’ accounts.¹²⁸ Recognizing the competing nature of these two discourses brings even more weight to Swinton and Mowat’s question—particularly as it relates to issues of normativity. Graham, Walton, and Ward raise similar questions in their critic of mutual critical correlation, asking: ‘Does the gospel stand in judgement over all other insights into the human condition, which are at best proto-theological; or does the Christian tradition itself require correction and revision?’¹²⁹

Swinton and Mowat attempt to address the problematic issue of granting other sources of knowledge—such as the social sciences—an equal footing with theology and theological knowledge in this process by assigning theology a logical priority that does not ‘acquire its ultimate significance’ from the social sciences.¹³⁰

Nevertheless, the authors suggest that even when granted logical priority, ‘theology itself can be and indeed should be the subject of critical reflection and challenge’.¹³¹

They do this by drawing analogously upon the Chalcedonian conception of the two natures of Christ.¹³² Seeing ‘the Chalcedonian pattern’ of the relationship between Christ’s divinity and humanity as having ‘indissoluble differentiation’, ‘inseparable unity’, ‘indestructible order’ and ‘logical priority’, Swinton and Mowat argue for a similar pattern in understanding the relationship between theology and the social sciences.¹³³ ‘Indissoluble differentiation’ means that theology and the social sciences

¹²⁷ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 102.

¹²⁸ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 380.

¹²⁹ Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection*, p. 168.

¹³⁰ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 87.

¹³¹ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 90.

¹³² In formulating this analogy, Swinton and Mowat also rely upon the work of Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger. See: Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling: A New Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

¹³³ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 84.

have specific roles to play and that they reveal specific forms of knowledge which should not be confused with one another'.¹³⁴ 'Inseparable unity' means that both the social sciences and theology offer knowledge that will challenge, shape, enhance, and sharpen one another. Neither will discount the other, and just as 'divinity and humanity were held together in the person of Christ, so also theology and the social sciences hold together in critical complementary tension within the lived experience of the researcher'.¹³⁵ 'Indestructible order' then becomes the basis for giving logical priority to theology in relationship. Swinton and Mowat argue that, just as the two natures of Christ are asymmetrically related, with Christ's divinity having a logical precedence over his humanity, so too should theology have precedence over the social sciences within the critical conversation. They remark, 'theology talks of ultimate issues, of life, death, God and the meaning of life. The social sciences do not have the capacity to deal with these issues. Thus theology has logical precedence within the conversation'.¹³⁶

Moving Beyond Correlation

While above attempts to address the methodological challenges present in correlational models are constructive, they often perpetuate the dualisms that practical theology is seeking to overcome. As this discussion of practical theology indicates, much of the development of this discipline has focused on moving beyond a dichotomist understanding of theory and practice or theology and human experience. Yet, as Pete Ward has argued, approaches such as the revised method of correlation are 'centred around the key issue of the problem of relationship between theory and practice, theology and experience, and the social sciences and systematic theology'.¹³⁷ By making the relationship between theology and human experience the methodological focal point, correlational approaches can actually reinforce the perceived divide between these two realms. To substantiate this argument, Ward suggests that practical theology has followed patterns established within the wider realm of modern theology.

¹³⁴ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 85.

¹³⁵ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, pp. 85-86.

¹³⁶ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 86.

¹³⁷ Ward, *Participation and Mediation*, p. 45.

Drawing upon David Ford's work, Ward outlines the way in which various types of modern theology can be placed along a linear continuum based upon their differing approaches to the relationship between the Christian faith and the intellectual environment of modernity.¹³⁸ On one pole Ford places an account of religion that attempts 'to repeat a traditional theology or version of Christianity and see all reality in its own terms'.¹³⁹ This approach is carried out without an acknowledgment of the relevance of modern perspectives. On the opposite pole, Ford places an account of religion that 'gives complete priority to some modern secular philosophy or worldview'.¹⁴⁰ In this approach, Christianity, in order to be valid, must fit within the terms set forth by this particular philosophy or worldview. With these two extremes laid out, Ford suggests that correlational approaches—such as can be seen in Tillich's model—rest at the centre of this continuum.¹⁴¹ According to Ward, continuums such as Ford's, illustrate how the modern theological debate has focused on the 'problem of relationship', and how correlational approaches seek to reconcile 'two seemingly opposed positions'.¹⁴² Ward then argues that:

Practical theology has largely followed the pattern of discussion within modern theology. Many of its key theoretical frameworks have accepted the dualism inherent in the continuum, and it is this pattern that has framed practical theology.¹⁴³

Again, by accepting these dualistic assumptions, which are present in the correlational approaches that seek to 'reconcile' theology and human experience, practical theologians are in danger of actually reinforcing the very dichotomies that their discipline is attempting to overcome.

Ward contends that recent approaches in both modern theology and practical theology have attempted to reframe the discussions surrounding theology and human

¹³⁸ David F. Ford, "Introduction to Modern Christian Theology," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. David F. Ford and Muers Rachel, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005). For Ward's treatment of this work see: Ward, *Participation and Mediation*, pp. 34-39.

¹³⁹ Ford, "Modern Christian Theology," p. 2.

¹⁴⁰ Ford, "Modern Christian Theology," p. 2

¹⁴¹ Ford, "Modern Christian Theology," pp. 2-3.

¹⁴² Ward, *Participation and Mediation*, p. 39.

¹⁴³ Ward, *Participation and Mediation*, p. 43.

experience in a way that avoids the dualisms inherent in correlational models.¹⁴⁴ He sees these disciplines turning towards *culture* as a key theological category—suggesting that this is ‘a positive move because it means that theologians are tending to see “ideas” about God as somehow connected and conditioned by historical and social realities’.¹⁴⁵ In this approach, practical theology remains committed to what Cameron and others have identified as its central task, which is, ‘to propose anew the deep connectedness of the Christian theological tradition and human experience’.¹⁴⁶ This deep connectedness means that theology is not something that is detached from practice, or something to be ‘correlated’ with data generated through social analysis, but rather theology is actually deeply embedded within the practices. Thus for Cameron and others, the research conducted by practical theologians should consider all generated data as (potentially) theology. They argue that ‘the practices participated in and observed [by the researcher] are themselves bearers of theology’.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, as Ward has suggested, this move towards a more embodied understanding of theology serves to locate ‘the doctrinal in the practices and expression of Christian communities and traditions’.¹⁴⁸

Proposed Approach to Practical Theology and Emerging Church

Since practical theology represents a discipline seeking to move beyond dualistic understandings of the relationship between theory and practice, Christian tradition and human experience, and theology and the social sciences, and since correlational approaches can actually reinforce these dichotomies, I have chosen to eschew these methods in this thesis. Instead, I have selected an approach to practical theology that moves beyond correlation and recognizes the embodied nature of theology. Because this thesis has emerging church as its focus, a number of recent developments in the way that churches are studied have also significantly influenced this decision. While these developments are examined in more detail in chapter six, introducing them at

¹⁴⁴ Ward puts forward George Lindbeck, Kathryn Tanner, and Nicholas Healy as examples of modern theologians moving beyond correlational models. He sees Elaine Graham’s work as an example of a practical theology moving beyond correlational approaches in practical theology. See: Ward, *Participation and Mediation*, pp. 40-43; 46-47.

¹⁴⁵ Ward, *Participation and Mediation*, p. 47.

¹⁴⁶ Cameron, et. al., *God in Practice*, p. 13.

¹⁴⁷ Cameron, et. al., *God in Practice*, p. 51.

¹⁴⁸ Ward, *Participation and Mediation*, p. 47.

this point provides a crucial context for understanding the approach to practical theology taken in this thesis. In order to appreciate these developments in how the church is studied, and in order to recognize how they impact my chosen methodology, consider Michael Jinkins' account of how the task of examining churches would have been taken up in the not too distant past:

A generation ago a book on ecclesiology would have been a fairly predictable enterprise. Depending on the tradition from which it emerged it would have begun with biblical foundations, descriptions of the early Christian community (this generally would have been understood in a relatively homogeneous and singular manner as "community"), or a historical-doctrinal examination of the traditions and creedal formulae regarding church. These foundational statements and descriptions would have been regarded as prescriptive for the life of contemporary churches in a kind of formula: Origin = Norm.¹⁴⁹

According to Jinkins, this monochrome ecclesiological investigation would often neglect to consider the concrete experiences of local faith communities—experiences that tended towards the more colourful actualities of ‘plurality, diversity, particularity, and contingency’.¹⁵⁰

Recent years however have witnessed an upsurge in the turn to the diversely particular experiences of actual communities and congregations in order to secure rewarding loci for meaningful ecclesiological enquiry. While some of these endeavours operate explicitly under the umbrella of ‘practical theology’ or ‘congregational studies’,¹⁵¹ others simply represent the fruit of modern theologians seeking to ground their discourse in lived Christianity. Nicholas Healy has used the term ‘new ecclesiology’ to classify the efforts of a growing number of these theologians who have turned their attention away from more idealized ‘models’ of church, focusing instead upon the activities and functions of the concrete church.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Michael Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 3.

¹⁵⁰ Jinkins, *Church Faces Death*, p. 3.

¹⁵¹ For more on the development of approaches such as these see: Linda Woodhead, Matthew Guest and Karin Tusting, “Congregational Studies: Taking Stock,” in *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 1-23.

¹⁵² Nicholas M. Healy, “Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5, no. 3 (November 2003): pp. 287-308.

He identifies theologians such as George Lindbeck, Robert Jenson, Stanley Hauerwas, and Kathryn Tanner as being a part of this trend. Significantly, Healy's classification of this new ecclesiology, and its turn to the concrete church, parallels Ward's description of modern theology's turn to the cultural, and its refusal to disconnect 'ideas' about God from the historical and social realities that condition them.

In this vein, Stanley Hauerwas has argued that, 'theology can too easily begin to appear as "ideas," rather than the kind of discourse that must, if it is to be truthful, be embedded in the practices of actual lived communities'.¹⁵³ Even so, if theologians wish to take seriously the virtue of embedding discourses in the complexity of Christian lives, they must be willing to deal honestly with what Kathryn Tanner describes as the 'ambiguous and porous character of the effort to live Christianly'.¹⁵⁴ In her assessment, a theology that insists upon being authentically concerned with not only 'academic matters' but also matters of Christian living, must, in addition to engaging with elite forms of written theology, give attention to the 'popular theologies of everyday life'—that is, 'how people without specialized theological training go about trying to live in accord with their Christian commitments'.¹⁵⁵

The type of theological reflection that is concerned with the theologies embedded in the everyday language and symbols of ordinary people has been described by Graham, Walton, and Ward as 'theology in the vernacular', or 'local theologies'.¹⁵⁶ According to these authors, this approach to practical theology 'draws attention to the specific form the Christian gospel assumes in any given place or time', and demonstrates how theology is 'culturally, temporally and spatially located' and therefore 'cannot exist independent of particular, embodied expressions'.¹⁵⁷ In this

¹⁵³ Stanley Hauerwas, "In Defense of Cultural Christianity: Reflections on Going to Church," in *Changing Churches: The Local Church and the Structures of Change*, ed. Michael Warren (Portland, Oregon: Pastoral Press, 2000), p. 186.

¹⁵⁴ Kathryn Tanner, "Shifts in Theology Over the Last Quarter Century," *Modern Theology* 26, no. 1 (January 2010): p. 44.

¹⁵⁵ Tanner, "Shifts in Theology," p. 42.

¹⁵⁶ Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection*, p. 200.

¹⁵⁷ Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection*, p. 200.

model, any ecclesiology that desires to ground its theological reflections in lived Christianity must conduct a careful listening to the actualities and particularities of concrete communities, since these communities provide a space in which theological deliberations concerning church can be explored through the reality of those living as church. Thus, when considering the ecclesiological contributions emerging churches offer their parent communities, I desired to take seriously their own ‘everyday’ efforts to be church—listening carefully for the tensions and questions that arose from within two particular emerging communities.¹⁵⁸

Yet, when considering the contributions these churches offer their parent communities, a mechanism for bringing the lived experiences of emerging churches into an encounter with the communities from which they emerged was necessary. In order to facilitate this encounter, I have adapted a method introduced by Robert Schreiter in his influential work on local theologies, using it as a basis for the structuring of my own research.¹⁵⁹ In the section that follows I briefly outline the nature of Schreiter’s task to bring local theologies into conversation with the wider Christian tradition and then signify how I have tailored his model for the purposes of my investigation into the ecclesiological contributions of emerging churches. Although writing from a missiological perspective, Schreiter’s approach fits nicely within the model of practical theology chosen for this thesis. As Ward has suggested, practical theology’s move away from correlational models means that this discipline is now much more concerned with areas that have traditionally been associated with missiology—areas such as culture and context.¹⁶⁰ Additionally, Ward posits that the renewed interest in the missional character of the church in the past few decades has also blurred the boundaries between the fields of missiology and ecclesiology, granting ecclesiologists access to missiological methods in their study of churches. Finally, Schreiter’s local theologies is taken up by Graham,

¹⁵⁸ The specific rationale for choosing two communities, the method for selecting these churches, and the approaches used to carry out this listening will be explained in below section entitled ‘Theologically Situated Approaches to Emerging Church’.

¹⁵⁹ See: Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (1985; repr., Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996).

¹⁶⁰ Ward, *Participation and Mediation*, p. 52.

Walton, and Ward in their description of ‘theology in the vernacular’, putting it forward as a fitting example of this type of theological reflection.¹⁶¹

‘Theology in the Vernacular’ – Adaptation of Schreiter’s Local Theologies

Writing from a missiological perspective, Schreiter demonstrates how the complex and unique fabric of a local culture serves to inform a community’s perception of theology and Christian praxis. He argues that the wider Christian tradition should be sensitive to this cultural context, allowing for the construction of local theologies. These theologies will encourage local communities to shape their encounter with Christianity in a way that is responsive to their own concrete situations. Even so, the creation of these local theologies is full of exceptional challenges, and Schreiter raises several questions concerning the process:

How is a community to go about bringing to expression its own experiences of Christ in its concrete situation? And how is this to be related to a tradition that is often expressed in language and concepts vastly different from anything in the current situation?¹⁶²

In responding to this challenge Schreiter developed a mechanism for bringing local theologies into a dialogue with the wider theological tradition for mutual development and benefit. As the below *Chart 1* indicates, this is not a model of correlation, where experiences arising from concrete situations need to be ‘reconciled’ with an abstracted Christian tradition. Instead, Schreiter’s dialogue sees the Christian tradition itself as a series of local theologies, which have grown up in response to needs that have arisen in concrete, historical contexts.¹⁶³ These local theologies that have survived and have come together to make up ‘the Christian tradition’, survived because ‘they expressed with some degree of adequacy the experience of believers’.¹⁶⁴ Thus, as Schreiter argues, this gives the surviving local theologies some measure of ‘enduring validity’ against which local communities can measure their own local theologies.

¹⁶¹ See: Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection*, pp. 214-217.

¹⁶² Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, p. xi.

¹⁶³ Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, p. 32.

¹⁶⁴ Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, p. 32.

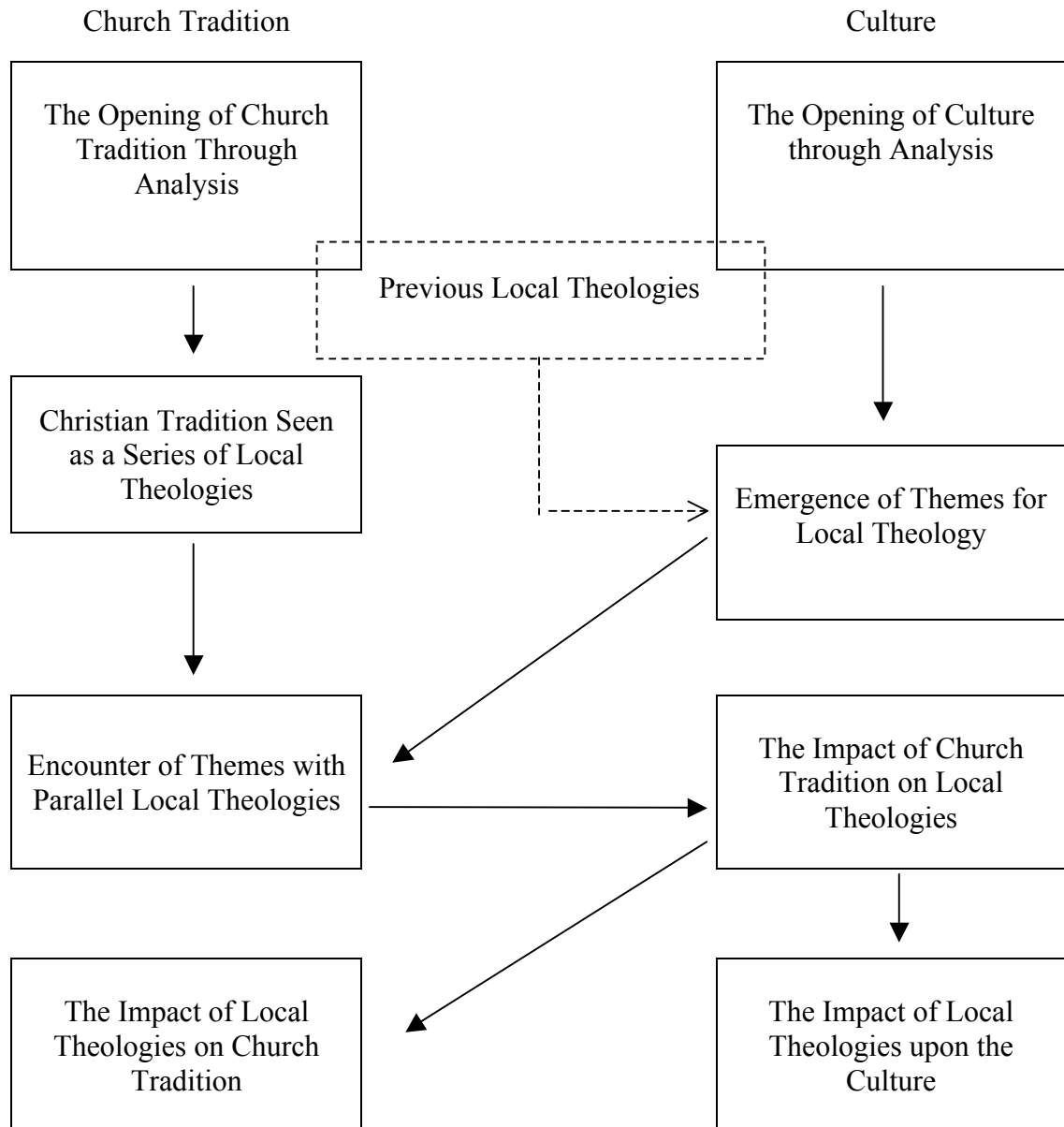


Chart 1: Schreiter's Local Theology Dialogue

Recognizing a parallel between Schreiter's task of bringing a localized theology into conversation with the wider Christian tradition, and my own aims of bringing the lived experiences of emerging churches into an encounter with existing understandings of church, I adapted his mechanism for the purpose of creating a structure that brings these two entities into a dialogue with one another. *Chart 2* on the subsequent page identifies the conversation partners in my research and indicates

the general flow of the dialogue I am facilitating between emerging churches and their parent communities.¹⁶⁵ Following the chart is a brief description of the particular research tasks associated with the various components of the dialogue process, and an overview of how, and where, each is dealt with in the thesis.

¹⁶⁵ This chart is adapted from Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, p. 25

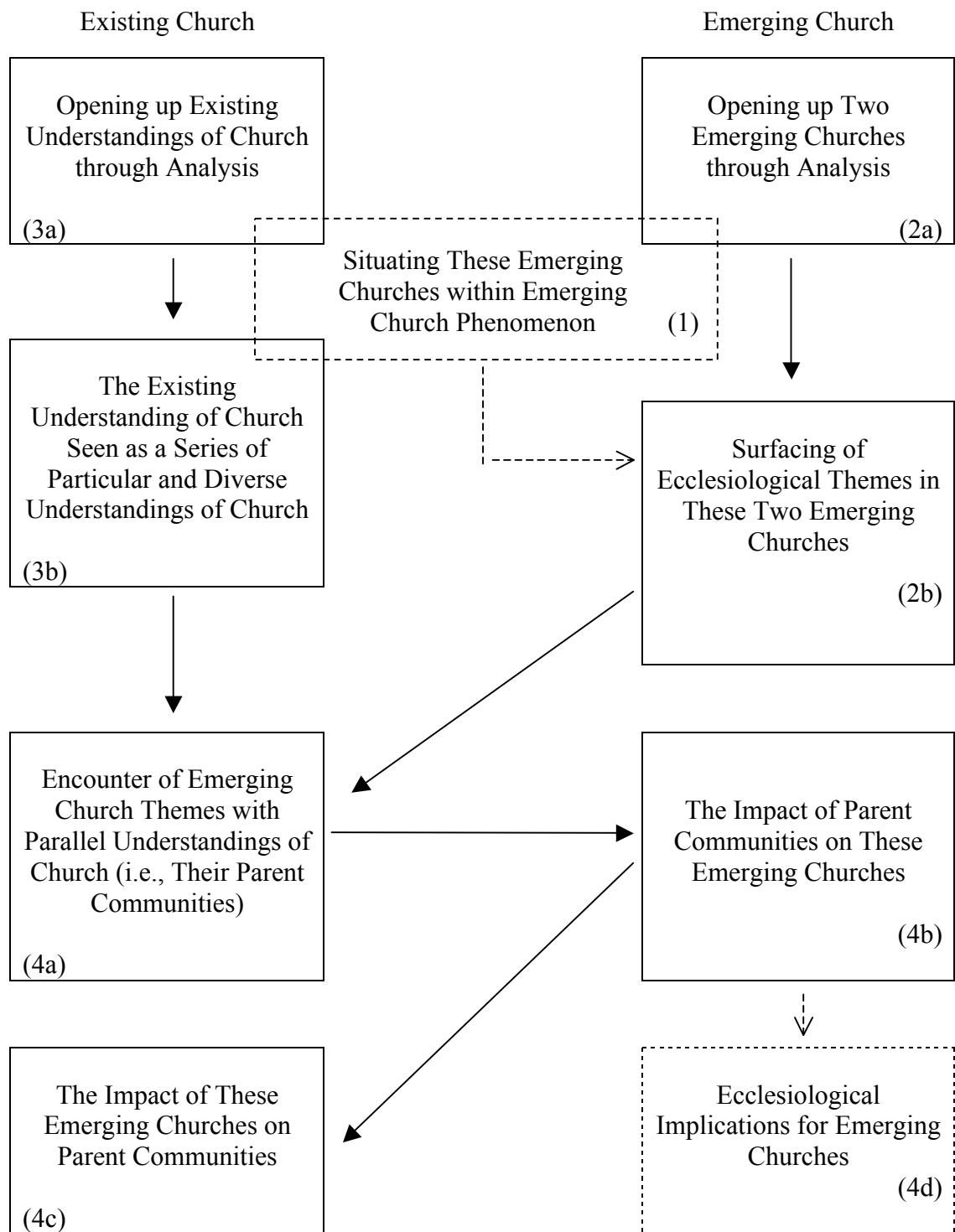


Chart 2: Components in the Dialogue Process

While this thesis has as its primary subject the concrete experiences of two emerging churches, I am acutely aware of the fact that these communities have not materialized *de novo*. Thus, by making the ecclesial setting of the emerging church phenomenon the preliminary point of consideration, I am acknowledging the various contextual realities that have combined to give shape to these communities and to the ecclesiological themes that surface through my research. Crucially, Schreiter argued that these shaping influences represent *obstacles* which one needs to navigate, *reminders* of one's connection to the larger tradition, and *revelatory aspects* which need careful investigation in order to understand the various theologies 'woven into the very warp and woof of local Christian identity'.¹⁶⁶

Failing to begin with the concrete setting of emerging churches would undermine the various propositions outlined above that serve to shape the approach to this entire thesis. Indeed, Schreiter states the importance of context firmly when he suggests:

It has gradually become unthinkable in many Christian churches to engage in any theological reflections without first studying the context in which it is taking place... There is now a realization that all theologies have contexts, interests, relationships of power, special concerns—and to pretend that this is not the case is to be blind.¹⁶⁷

Consequently, this component of the dialogue process (*area I*) is concerned with exploring the specific ecclesial contexts that have given rise to emerging churches. While I provided an introductory overview of the wider emerging church phenomenon in the first chapter, the majority of the elements contained in this portion of the research are set forth in chapter three. Chapter three of this thesis outlines the history and development of the emerging church phenomenon—providing an ecclesial context for the two emerging communities and situating them within that framework. It exists as a contextual backdrop, informing and enlightening my analysis of the two emerging communities.

¹⁶⁶ Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, pp. 27-28.

¹⁶⁷ Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, p. 4.

Analysing Emerging Churches (2a-2b)

As acknowledged above, the basis of this study is the concrete reality of emerging churches. Thus, these components in the dialogue process (*areas 2a and 2b*) rest at the centre of my investigatory endeavors. Their aim is to give focused attention to the lived experiences of two particular emerging communities—surfacing the ecclesiological themes present in the research findings. I follow the proposals set forth by Schreiter in accomplishing this aim. In particular, I engage in a ‘long and careful listening’ to these emerging churches in order to discover their principal values, interests, practices, symbols, rituals and beliefs—identifying discernable themes in their ecclesiological understanding and praxis.¹⁶⁸ Because this portion of the study is intended to produce a thick and robust description of these emerging churches, I employ various qualitative research methodologies such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups in order to elicit the shared meanings held by those within the two communities. The section below entitled ‘Methods for Generating and Analysing Data’ offers a discussion of these qualitative methods and how they are employed in my research of these emerging churches. Chapters four and five offer a thorough depiction of the two communities—describing each church’s ecclesial contexts and historical development; their weekly patterns, physical spaces, and worship gatherings; the participant’s profiles and personal narratives; and the community’s core practices. I then conclude this portion of the dialogue process in chapter six, by surfacing the ecclesiological themes common to both of these emerging churches.

Analysing Existing Understandings of Church (3a-3b)

While Christian communities have consistently assembled around Jesus Christ in order to publicly profess their faith in him, they have done so in a fashion that is remarkably disparate and pluriform.¹⁶⁹ If one takes seriously the diversity of expression in what is called church, a monolithic approach to investigating the

¹⁶⁸ Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, p. 28.

¹⁶⁹ This understanding of the assembling congregation is informed by Miroslav Volf’s ecclesiological writing: Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 158.

Christian community will not suffice.¹⁷⁰ Thus, I use these components of the dialogue process (*areas 3a and 3b*)—functioning in parallel with the analysis of emerging churches (*areas 2a and 2b*)—to investigate the nature of theological reflection on the church, arguing for an approach that recognizes the many *ecclesiologies* present in a historically and culturally situated Christian community. In opening up this understanding of ecclesiology, with a focus on the particularity and diversity found in the lived experiences of actual Christian communities, I posit that the wider understanding of church is to be interpreted as a series of particular and diverse understandings of church that have arisen in response to specific historical and cultural contexts. Importantly, the contextualized understandings of church that have survived, and which now combine to make up the wider understanding of church, have survived for a reason—namely, they express ‘with some degree of adequacy’ the experiences of Christians throughout the centuries.¹⁷¹ This analysis of existing understandings of church takes place in chapter six of the thesis.

Emerging Churches in Dialogue with their Parent Communities (4a-4d)

The final set of components in the dialogue process (*areas 4a, 4b, 4c, and 4d*) represent the conversation that takes place between emerging churches and existing understandings of church in the aim of locating the contributions these churches are making to their parent communities. According to Schreiter’s description of this mechanism, the initial encounter—which brings emerging church themes into dialogue with particular and diverse understandings of church (*area 4a*)—is often the place where the actual crystallization and development of the distinguishable and unique qualities of emerging church takes place. Here is where one expects to find not only parallels between emerging churches and their parent churches, but also the attributes that differentiate emerging churches from these communities. This differentiation ‘provides the possibility of a local church helping to expand the history of Christian reflection that makes up the tradition’.¹⁷² In the instance of this

¹⁷⁰ In fact, the concept of diverse expressions of church is even evidenced in the ‘New Testament church’, where ‘a variety of different kinds of communities’ are revealed to us—leaving Schreiter to comment that ‘there is no unified New Testament church, except in the minds of later Christians’. Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, p. 10.

¹⁷¹ Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, p. 32.

¹⁷² Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, pp. 33-34.

research, this differentiation opens up the possibility for emerging churches to help expand their parent communities' understanding of what it means to be church.

Yet, in order for a particular community to be considered a *Christian* community, it must have a 'genuine encounter with the Christian tradition'.¹⁷³ Thus part of this conversation between emerging church and existing understandings of church explores the impact that the parent communities have upon emerging churches (*area 4b*). Exploring this impact can be an affirming aspect of the research, as emerging church's practices and ecclesiological understandings are confirmed by the practices and understandings found in other Christian communities.

Still, the conversation between emerging church and existing understandings of church is not a unilateral occurrence that ends with the impact of the parent communities on emerging churches. Indeed, the very nature of this thesis is to uncover the contributions that emerging church might make to their parent communities' understanding of what it means to be church. According to Schreiter, these contributions of local theologies are vital for the development of the wider tradition. They often raise questions that have never been considered, or they can remind the wider community of parts of the tradition that have been neglected or forgotten.¹⁷⁴ Therefore, this part of this conversation between emerging church and existing understandings of church explores precisely how emerging churches might be impacting their parent communities understanding of what it means to be church (*area 4c*).

There is a residual outcome from this dialogue process that is also considered in this thesis—namely, what are the ecclesiological implications of this conversation for emerging churches? In other words, if emerging churches are raising a particular question, revealing something new, or reminding their parent communities of something they have ignored; what impact does this have upon their own ecclesial community? While a direct parallel with Schreiter's mechanism would consider the

¹⁷³ Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, p. 34.

¹⁷⁴ Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, p. 34.

implications this dialogue process has for the entire emerging church (*area 4d*), this level of reflection is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead of drawing implications for the entire emerging church, I focus on the ecclesiological impact that this conversation has for the two emerging churches I studied for this thesis. While this portion of the dialogue process stands as secondary outcome, it nonetheless provides an indication of what the parent communities can anticipate as they encounter the contributions being made by emerging churches. The above elements contained in this portion of the dialogue process (*areas 4a, 4b, 4c, and 4d*) are also set forth in chapter six of the thesis.

Methodological Approaches to Emerging Church

As the above mechanism adapted from Schreiter indicates, analysing the ecclesiological contributions of emerging church requires a long and careful listening to the beliefs and practices of these communities. According to Cameron and others, social scientific methods are valuable in helping researchers carryout this analysis—providing them with the necessary instruments for ‘reading’ these practices.¹⁷⁵ Still, when selecting a particular methodological approach for analysing emerging church, a number of crucial factors must be considered. Indeed, not only must the chosen approach consider the situation under investigation and the questions being asked, but it should also take into account *who* is asking the questions (i.e., the researcher), and the kinds of answers that are being sought. How one assesses these crucial factors will determine not only the overall approach of the investigation, but also the particular methods that are to be employed by the researcher.

Thus far, I have argued the importance of empirically based studies of emerging church. I have also argued that the complex nature of emerging church invites a qualitative approach to this subject. Furthermore, due to the ideographic nature and ecclesiological content of the questions being asked, I have suggested that the discipline of practical theology is well suited for this investigation and have thus situated the thesis within this field. I now turn my attention towards a more detailed consideration of my methodological approach and the particular qualitative methods

¹⁷⁵ Cameron, et. al., *God in Practice*, p. 23.

selected for this thesis. In doing so, I evaluate the merits of this approach and the methods I selected in light of the abovementioned crucial factors, and in the context of other doctoral work on emerging church.

Sociologically Situated Approaches to Emerging Church

As indicated in chapter one, an increasing amount of doctoral work is being done on emerging church. This is a welcome contribution, since many of these projects introduce and work with data generated through empirical research. When considering how to arrange these various research projects so as to conduct a comparative analysis between them and the research carried out for this thesis, the first distinction I make is between the differing academic disciplines out of which the studies arise. I draw a particular distinction between studies that are located in sociologically orientated fields, and studies that are located in theologically orientated fields. Even though each of these studies rely upon a combination of similar methods in researching emerging church, the types of questions being asked, and the kinds of answers being sought in the analysis of these examinations vary from field to field. Thus, while the sociological studies on emerging church carried out by Kate Simcox, Josh Packard, and Lloyd Chia generate meaningful insights into this phenomenon through qualitative investigations, they do not attempt to situate their findings within the discourse of theology.¹⁷⁶ Instead of interpreting and analysing the generated data through theological lenses, these studies seek to bring emerging church into conversation with various social theories.

For instance, Packard approached emerging church with the aim of refining a particular theory in sociology—namely, neo-institutionalism. By drawing upon the work of sociologist Michael Burawoy, Packard employed an *extended case method*, which requires the researcher to enter the field with a particular theory in mind, and then put that theory to the test by attempting to replicate it through everyday

¹⁷⁶ Kate D. Simcox, “Performing Postmodern Christian: Communication in the Emerging Church and the Renegotiation of Divine Knowledge” (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 2005); Josh Packard, “Organizational Structure, Religious Belief, and Resistance: the Emerging Church” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2008); Lloyd Chia, “Emerging Faith Boundaries: Bridge-Building, Inclusion, and the Emerging Church Movement in America” (PhD diss., University of Missouri-Columbia, 2010).

interactions with participants.¹⁷⁷ As the researcher uncovers irregularities between the theory and the case under consideration, the theory is then refined to better account for the anomalous case. Thus in the instance of Packard's research, the theory of neo-institutionalism was refined through his research on emerging church. So, even though Packard's research generated data through (1) a survey of six emerging communities in the United States, (2) participant observation in one of those communities, and (3) in-depth interviews with fifty-two emerging church participants, he entered the field, generated the data, and analysed the findings with the purpose of testing and refining a predetermined theory. Since the research being carried out in my thesis is not intended to test a particular theory in sociology, the *extended case method* is not the optimal methodological approach.

As for the work carried out by Simcox and Chia, while these two researchers used qualitative methods to explore emerging church, they did not engage in a theological analysis of the generated data. Instead, like Packard, these researchers focused on bringing their research into a constructive dialogue with different sociological theories. Simcox—who (1) conducted ten in depth interviews, (2) engaged in participant observation in four emerging communities, and (3) analysed three emerging church weblogs—employed *performance ethnography* as her methodological approach. This particular approach seeks to lessen the gap between 'self and other', or between researcher and those researched, through a re-enactment of notes generated through an ethnographic study.¹⁷⁸ Thus, in the study conducted by Simcox, actual 'performance texts' were structured in analysing the data, and a high degree of reflexivity was present throughout the research. In fact, the closing chapter of Simcox's work was an exercise in 'self-reflexivity' that focused on her own 'emergence'—bringing her own experiences into an-depth conversation with her research.¹⁷⁹ While reflexivity is a vital aspect of qualitative research, and will be addressed in more detail in the below section entitled *Reflexivity*, methodological

¹⁷⁷ For more on extended case method, see: Michael Burawoy, "The Extended Case Method," in *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis*, ed. Michael Burawoy, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 271-290.

¹⁷⁸ For more on performance ethnography, see: Bryant Keith Alexander, "Performance Ethnography: The Reenacting and Inciting of Culture," in *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, ed. Norman K. Denzin, and Yvonna S. Lincoln, (Los Angeles: Sage Publication, 2008), pp. 75-117.

¹⁷⁹ Simcox, "Performing Postmodern Christian," pp. 143-167.

approaches such as *performance ethnography* that centre on reflexivity in order to explore the relationship between self and other are not best suited for realizing the aims of my own thesis. Instead, this thesis, while remaining aware of issues of reflexivity in ethnographic research, will draw upon an approach that is better suited for generating and analysing data that is more ecclesiological substantial.

Chia also drew upon qualitative methods for his sociological investigation of emerging church, employing a sampling strategy for generating data designed to answer the question of how religions practise inclusion and find ways to build bridges across interfaith lines. In taking this sampling approach, Chai, through the methods of (1) discourse analysis, (2) participant observation, and (3) in-depth interviews, sought to generate large amounts of data to fill four major conceptual categories that corresponded to his question. Since the four broad conceptual categories of *boundaries*, *inclusion*, *bridge building*, and *postmodernism* were predetermined based upon the question being asked, a sampling strategy that generated a diverse range of qualitative data was best suited for Chia's research. Thus he observed local, regional, and national emerging church gatherings in the U.S., and conducted fifty in-depth interviews in person and online. Since in my own research, I did not begin with a set of predetermined conceptual categories in which to group data on emerging church, but rather approached emerging church as a particular situation needing further ecclesiological investigation, a sampling strategy that generated such a diverse range of material would not be as fitting as an approach that focused on generating data from specific and detailed instances of emerging church in localized settings.

Still, the largest distinction between the above studies and my own project is the fact that, because these studies are located in the field of sociology, they do not attempt to engage with the data theologically. Thus, because the question concerning the contribution emerging churches make to their parent communities' understanding of church is ecclesiological in nature, a purely sociological approach to the data generated is insufficient for my research. I now turn my attention to a comparison of theologically situated studies of emerging church.

Theologically Situated Approaches to Emerging Church

When considering the research on emerging church that is situated within theological fields of study, distinctions can be made between the different sub-disciplines in which these studies are located, the diverse contexts in which the research was conducted, and the various methods employed for generating and analysing data. Since the following studies are located in the field of practical theology—or a related discipline such as missiology, homiletics, or liturgical studies—and since I have already discussed various approaches to practical theology above, I will not enter into an extended discussion of the distinctions that exist between the various sub-disciplines. However, I will draw attention to where these studies take a different approach to practical theology than the one I have argued for above as a way of distinguishing my own work from theirs. In the sections that follow, I present the methodological approach I have selected for analysing emerging church. As I do so, I engage with other methodological approaches that have been taken up in previous doctoral work—showing how my own work differs, and demonstrating how the methods I have selected are most fitting for the question being asked in this thesis.

The Contextual Locations for the Research

When attempting to analyse emerging churches—with the aim of identifying what contributions they make to their parent communities' understanding of what it is to be church—selecting a suitable context for carrying out the research is critical. In locating a suitable context, one must consider the type of research subject or case to select, and the geographical or cultural setting in which to carry out the research. The following section indicates the type of case I have selected for this study, and the specific setting chosen for conducting the research.

Conducting Research in Emerging Communities

Because conversations concerning the wider emerging church phenomenon have taken place across a range of media and settings— from print literature and web-based discussions, to local and online communities—there is a diversity of contexts where one can take up an investigation of emerging church. For some doctoral researchers like Woo Joon Kim, John Alan Duncan, and Barry Dean Baker, written

texts and audio recordings provided the contextual settings for their investigations.¹⁸⁰ Locating their work in the fields of missiology (Kim), and homiletics (Duncan and Baker), these researchers conducted their research via an engagement with the published literature of emerging church authors, and the audio recordings of sermons from emerging church leaders.¹⁸¹ Since the research question in this thesis seeks to understand matters such as why those in emerging church left their parent tradition, and what those in emerging church find meaningful in their own emerging communities, focusing on material created by the leaders of emerging churches is unsuitable. Furthermore, as indicated earlier in this chapter, the approach to practical theology chosen for this thesis takes as its focus the ‘everyday’ efforts of Christians endeavoring to live out church. Thus, a suitable context for this study cannot be found in published resources or audio recordings on the topic of church, but is rather to be found in actual ecclesial communities, where church exists as an embodied expression. For this reason, I have selected to locate my research in concrete emerging communities. In conducting this investigation, I employ a *multi-focused congregational study*. I now turn my attention towards an explanation of this type of study.

In taking stock of the various approaches to congregational studies, Matthew Guest, Karin Tusting and Linda Woodhead broadly group these approaches into two broad types or categories.¹⁸² *Extrinsic* studies seek to study a congregation or congregations with a primary aim towards understanding a wider good that extends beyond the particular congregation. Examples of extrinsic studies include congregational research focused on church growth, church health, or church organization. *Intrinsic* studies, on the other hand, are those that investigate

¹⁸⁰ Woo Joon Kim, “An Evangelical Critique of the Emergent Church’s Hermeneutics and Its Effects on Theology, Message, and Method of Evangelism” (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, April 2012); Barry Dean Baker, “A Critical Analysis of the Theory and Practice of Preaching in the Emerging Church Movement” (PhD diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, December 2006); and John Alan Duncan, “A Critical Analysis of Preaching in the Emerging Church” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, May 2011).

¹⁸¹ Baker analysed sixty audio recordings of sermons from Rob Bell, Mark Driscoll, Tim Keel, Rick McKinley, Doug Pagitt, Chris Seay. Duncan focuses his analysis on over one hundred audio recordings of sermons from Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, Doug Pagitt, Tim Conder, Steve Chalke, and Spencer Burke. Importantly, not all of these individuals self-identify as emerging church participants.

¹⁸² Matthew Guest, Karin Tusting, and Linda Woodhead, eds., *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context*, (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2004).

congregations for their own sake or for the primary purpose of understanding them. Still within these intrinsic studies, there are varying degrees to which researchers will extend the findings of their investigation beyond the particular congregation they are studying. Intrinsic studies that are *self-contained* make little effort to extrapolate the data beyond the congregation being studied, whereas intrinsic studies that are *multi-focused* seek to make wider application of the research findings. Indeed, even though a multi-focused approach is chiefly intrinsic, it often rests at the threshold of the extrinsic and intrinsic study due to its focus extending beyond the congregation being studied. As indicated above, the multi-focused approach is the one that informed my research. By undertaking this approach, I am able to recognize and account for the *intrinsic* notions that suggest that each emerging congregation possesses their own distinct cultures laden with unique practices and meanings. I am also able to acknowledge the *extrinsic* importance of bringing the particulars from different emerging church congregations into conversation with one another, the wider emerging church phenomenon, and their parent communities.

Significantly, eight other doctoral researchers have also selected actual emerging communities as the location for carrying out their research. In doing so, they selected a range of methods for generating data in these contexts. While I conduct a comparative examination of their methods in the below sections entitled ‘Generating Fieldwork Data’ and ‘Accounting for the Data from the Field’, for the purposes of this current discussion on the diverse settings for researching emerging church I wish to turn my attention to the communities they chose—paying particular attention to the number of communities selected, and the geographical location of their research. In doing this, I distinguish my own research, offering a rationale for selecting the particular communities I chose to research.

Selection of Emerging Communities to Study

This section addresses a matter of crucial importance for this research—namely, the difficult process of selecting an appropriate emerging congregation to study. The complexity of choosing a suitable emerging community is a result of the diversity of expression that exists within the wider emerging church phenomenon. Indeed, given

Scott Bader-Saye's assertion that 'there is no single pattern of *emerging church*',¹⁸³ identifying a community that captured a fraction of the emerging church phenomenon—much less the whole of the network—surfaced as a daunting challenge in the research. Several researchers sought to account for the diversity by surveying a larger number of emerging communities. For instance, Tony Jones, who situated his research in the field of practical theology, conducted research across eight different emerging communities in the U.S.¹⁸⁴ Likewise, Robert Whitesel, who took a missiological approach to emerging church, surveyed twelve 'organic' churches in both North America and the U.K.—not all of which consider themselves emerging churches.¹⁸⁵ Yet, an increase in the number of communities being studied has a direct impact the type of research one can conduct, and the methods one can employ in carrying out this research. Again, more is said regarding the methods used for generating data in the below section on this topic, but at this point in the chapter I wish to suggest that selecting a smaller number of communities to study is a more suitable methodological approach for this particular research. In order to follow the model of practical theology argued for above, which draws upon the proposals of Schreiter and calls for a long and careful listening to emerging communities, it is necessary to limit the number of communities being studied. By devoting more attention to a smaller number of congregations, I am able to offer a thicker description of the ecclesial qualities of these communities—focusing in-depth on their values, interests, practices, symbols, rituals, and beliefs. This approach also fits with the aims of a multi-focused congregational study by recognizing the intrinsic dimensions to this type of study.

¹⁸³ Scott Bader-Saye, "Improvising Church: An Introduction to the Emerging Church Conversation," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6 (March 2006): p. 14.

¹⁸⁴ These emerging communities were: Cedar Ridge Community Church (Spencerville, Maryland), Solomon's Porch (Minneapolis, Minnesota), House of Mercy (St. Paul, Minnesota), Journey (Dallas, Texas) Pathways Church (Denver, Colorado) Church of the Apostles (Seattle, Washington), Jacob's Well (Kansas City, Missouri), and Vintage Faith Church (Santa Cruz, California)—which no longer appropriates the appellation 'emerging'. See: Anthony Hawthorne Jones, "The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement in Practical Theological Perspective" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2011) [Kindle version: Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (2011)].

¹⁸⁵ These communities were: Solomon's Porch (Minneapolis, Minnesota), The Tribe (Los Angeles, California), Bluer (Minneapolis, Minnesota), Scum of the Earth (Denver, Colorado), One Place (Phoenix, Arizona), Church of the Apostles (Seattle, Washington), Freeway (Baton Rouge, Louisiana), Vintage Faith (Santa Cruz, California); The Bridge (Phoenix, Arizona), Mars Hill (Grandville, Michigan), Sol Cafe (Edmonton, Alberta Canada), St. Thomas (Sheffield, U.K.). See: Robert B. Whitesel, "Recurring Patterns of Organic Churches: An Analysis of Twelve Emerging Congregations" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, May 2009).

Other researchers have also conducted their investigation into emerging church by focusing on a smaller number of congregations. In fact, both Steve Taylor and Corey Labanow chose to carry out their research through an in-depth examination of a single community. While both situated their work within the field of practical theology, Taylor centred his research on an ‘alt-worship’ community in New Zealand, whereas Labanow centred his research on an emerging community in the U.K.¹⁸⁶ While focusing on a single congregation allows for a more in-depth exploration into the practices and beliefs of an actual emerging community, because there is not another emerging community that can corroborate the findings, or serve as a point of reference outside the single community, extrapolating the data beyond the congregation being studied becomes more difficult. Since I have selected a *multi-focused* congregational study in order to bring emerging church into dialogue with their parent communities’ understanding of church—as opposed to a *self-contained* congregational study, which makes minimal effort to move the analysis beyond the congregation being studied—having a second community as an additional location for research is valuable. Thus, for this thesis, I chose to research two emerging communities. While other researches such as John Hall, Janine Paden Morgan, Karyn Wiseman, and Terrance Steele have also conducted their research in two to four emerging communities, the settings for these investigations differ.¹⁸⁷ I now turn my attention to the selection of the emerging communities, focusing first on the setting for this research.

Before selecting two specific emerging churches to study, I first had to identify the setting within which to conduct my field research. For both practical and academic reasons, I chose the United States and the United Kingdom as the two distinct environments for my research. This selection was justifiable practically, due to my

¹⁸⁶ Steve Taylor, “A New Way of Being Church: Approach to Cityside Baptist Church as Christian Faith ‘Making Do’ in a Postmodern World” (PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2004); and Corey E. Labanow, “The Challenges of Reconstruction: a Congregational Study of an Emerging Church” (PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2006).

¹⁸⁷ John Hall, “The Rise of the Youth Congregation and Its Missiological Significance” (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2003); Janine Paden Morgan, “Emerging Eucharist: Formative Ritualizing in British Emerging Churches” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2009); Karyn L. Wiseman, “Grace Space: the Creation of Worship Space for the Postmodern / Emerging Church” (PhD diss., Drew University, 2006); and Terrance Steele, “The Missiology of the Emerging Church in Portland, Oregon” (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2012).

familiarity and history in the United States and my current residential status and growing knowledge of the United Kingdom. It was also justifiable academically, considering the concentration of emerging churches in these two locales and the attention they have received.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, there existed enough ecclesial and cultural diversity between the two settings to provide fertile ground for compelling ecclesiological comparisons.¹⁸⁹ By focusing the research on a community in the United Kingdom and a community in the United States, this study creates a more diversified portrait of emerging church than do studies that only consider emerging church in a single context. Of the eight theologically situated doctoral studies that focus on actual emerging communities, only one work researches emerging church in a multinational setting. Tony Jones, Karyn Wiseman, and Terrance Steele focus their research exclusively on emerging churches in the United States. Similarly, Janine Paden Morgan, John Hall, and Corey Labanow each exclusively focus on emerging communities in the United Kingdom. Finally, Steve Taylor's work on an alternative worship community focuses on a congregation in New Zealand. Robert Witesel's research is the only one that considers emerging church in a multinational setting—researching communities in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Still, his decision to study 'organic' churches means that not every community he investigated self-identifies as an emerging church. More importantly, because Witesel's methodological approach involved surveying a larger number of communities, he was not able to conduct the long and careful listening that I have called for in this research. Indeed, the ethnographic methods that I employ in my research offer a richer portrayal of emerging church in two distinct settings, focusing on the routine life of these communities and the experiences that those participating in emerging church found meaningful. More is said regarding these ethnographic methods and how they differ from the research of Witesel and others in the below section entitled 'Participant Observation', but before turning to this discussion, I first explain my rationale for selecting the specific emerging communities for this study.

Given the parameters of selecting an emerging community in the United Kingdom and an emerging community in the United States, the next task was identifying the

¹⁸⁸ See: Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (London: SPCK, 2006), p. 8.

¹⁸⁹ This cultural and ecclesial diversity is considered in greater detail in chapter six.

two particular cases to study. This selection was guided by the principles of *purposive sampling*, which, in distinction from *random sampling* or *convenience sampling*, allows the researcher to choose a particular case because it demonstrates certain features in which she or he is interested.¹⁹⁰ Crucially, though, purposive sampling does not grant blanket approval for any case that is chosen, but rather demands critical evaluation around the particular subject being researched in order to form a basis for the case selection. Consequently, I further detail below my criteria and rationale for choosing the congregations that I did. In doing this, I first identify the two emerging churches I chose as my sites of research. As I highlight the various features of these two congregations, I contrast them with several emerging churches that were not chosen in order to substantiate their selection.

The two churches where I conducted the fieldwork portion of my research were *Novitas* in Wellingham, England and *Common Table* in Springfield, US.¹⁹¹ The first criterion I employed in choosing these communities was whether or not they consider themselves to be a part of the larger emerging church phenomenon. This specific criterion is important, as there are a number of ecclesial communities that exhibit certain emerging church features but do not readily self-identify as an emerging church. An example of this is *Mars Hill Church* in Grand Rapids, Michigan. While this community is at times labelled by others as an emerging church, is highly influential in emerging church conversations, and on some level could be identified as being a part of this nebulous phenomenon, they do not self-identify as an emerging church.¹⁹² Conversely, both *Novitas* and *Common Table* consider themselves to be emerging churches and readily identify with the wider emerging church phenomenon.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ See: David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook* (London: Sage, 2000), pp. 104-105.

¹⁹¹ Pseudonyms.

¹⁹² Thus, the findings of Witesel, Baker, and Duncan, who include *Mars Hill* as a part of their study of emerging church, should be qualified by the fact that *Mars Hill* does not consider itself to be an emerging church.

¹⁹³ In fact, the leaders in these two churches have published material that links their congregations to this wider phenomenon. For purposes of anonymity, this material has not been cited.

A second and related criterion for selecting *Novitas* and *Common Table* as my sites of research was that the wider research community recognized these churches as emerging churches. Indeed, as Gibbs and Bolger have argued, churches can adopt some of the stylistic and aesthetic apparatuses of emerging church, and yet still not be authentically *emerging*.¹⁹⁴ Again, the wider research community has documented the two emerging communities that I selected as my sites of research as being authentic participants in the wider emerging church phenomenon.¹⁹⁵ Given the diversity present in emerging churches and the porous nature of the network's boundaries, the above two criteria represent sufficient grounding for selecting these congregations as sites of research. Yet, there were other important reasons I chose the particular communities of *Novitas* and *Common Table*, and I now turn my attention towards highlighting these specifics.

Although emerging communities are considered to be more innovative in their expressions of church, they differ in the degree to which they experiment and deviate from the conventions of their predecessors. Due to the experimental nature of some of these churches, volatility and sustainability represent a considerable concern. Often times, the more experimental and unconventional the emerging communities are, the more likely it is that they will either disband or dissolve. Two emerging church situations—one in the US and one in the UK—represent this phenomenon well. Even though both, *Vaux* and *Axxess* stood as high profile emerging churches in the early years of the conversation, they have since disbanded and are no longer gathering as a community. Furthermore, exceptionally small and tenuously formed emerging churches are susceptible to the *donut phenomenon*. This phrase was coined to describe the emerging community of *Grace* during a period of time in which they were receiving considerable attention as a result of their experimentation. To understand the risks involved in researching a community susceptible to this situation, I quote at length the description of the donut phenomenon from their website:

¹⁹⁴ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, p. 45.

¹⁹⁵ See: Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*; Michael Moynagh, *Emergingchurch.Intro* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2004); Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, eds., *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2007); and F. LeRon Shults, "Reforming Ecclesiology in Emerging churches," *Theology Today* 65, no. 4 (January 2009): pp. 425-438.

But Grace had become an object of curiosity around the world to those interested in [what was now being called] the emerging church, through the photos on smallfire.org, through the labyrinth, and the blogosphere. The people who did turn up to Grace were from anywhere and everywhere. We began to joke about who had come furthest to a Grace service—often people from Australia and New Zealand, many of whom had met members of Grace through discussions online and were now traveling the world researching the emerging church... And then there were visitors from other places in Britain, lay and clergy, wanting to experience alternative worship, wondering if they could do it themselves.

Someone—maybe Kester Brewin—coined the term ‘donut’ at this time, to describe a typical emerging church predicament in the internet age—impressive media presence and resources, all the appearances of professionalism and success, all generated by very few people—loads of tasty stuff but [almost] nothing in the middle. We embraced our unexpected global mission as a blessing—but it created strains. At times there were more ‘tourists’ than locals. Grace members could find it disturbing, when their worship was subject to semi-detached scrutiny rather than genuine participation. There was no continuity of congregation from one service to the next. The service was effectively a showcase, put on by the team for whoever else might turn up on the night. The planning group was often just two or three people, risking burnout or banality.¹⁹⁶

Although an interesting feature of emerging church, this sort of volatility—where there were at times only *one* actual *Grace* member participating in the gatherings—ran the risk of proving problematic for my particular research, and so I therefore inclined away from selecting the highly nebulous communities as sites for conducting fieldwork.

For the above reasons of longevity and stability, I chose to base my case studies in more established and conventional emerging churches like *Novitas* and *Common Table*.¹⁹⁷ This is not to argue that sustainability and longevity are essential criteria by which to measure emergence or significance. Indeed, it could be argued that

¹⁹⁶ Grace, “A History of Grace,” Grace—Fresh Vital Worship, <http://www.freshworship.org/node/424> (accessed 22 February 2008).

¹⁹⁷ ‘Conventional’ as used here should be understood as relative to other emerging churches and not to the wider Christian community. In other words, even though I am choosing to focus on more conventional emerging churches, this does not imply that these communities would be considered conventional by most ecclesial standards.

certain ephemeral movements have left indubitable marks upon the way in which various communities live out church. Yet, those marks are best measured when one has more distance from their occurrence.

Now that I put forward the rationale for selecting the specific emerging communities to serve as my sites of research, I turn my attention to an examination of the particular methods chosen for generating and analysing the data of this study. In doing so, I evaluate the methods selected in light of the approach to practical theology argued for above, and in the context of other doctoral work that has focused on actual emerging communities.

Methods for Generating and Analysing Data

Because this research is designed to produce a thick and robust account of these two emerging communities, and because the knowledge being sought in this study is ideographic in nature, a qualitative approach is needed. Thus, I employ a selection of qualitative methods—including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups—in order to generate a deeper understanding of why those in emerging churches left their parent traditions, and what it is they find meaningful in their own communities. Yet, before turning to a discussion of these qualitative methods, I must first consider two critical issues in qualitative research—namely, the issues of reflexivity and research ethics.

Research Ethics

When undertaking a study that involves human subjects, the ethical implications of the research should be considered. This is even more important when qualitative methods such as participant observation and in-depth interviews are employed. Because these methods seek to elicit detailed data from communities and individuals—data that has the potential to be personal in nature—ethical precautions must be taken to protect the research subjects.

In order to ensure that those participating in this research would be protected, and in compliance with the policies set forth by the University of Edinburgh's *Ethics in*

Research Committee, I conducted an ethics assessment before beginning the empirical components of this research.¹⁹⁸ In undertaking this assessment, guidelines were established to ensure that participant's consent was sought, and their confidentiality was appropriately protected. These guidelines required interviewees to give signed consent before interviews. This consent form, which details the aims of the research project, the way the data will be handled, and the voluntary nature of participation, is located in Appendix B. While the consent form states that participants would be anonymised in the research, in order to ensure that their confidentiality would remain protected, it was necessary to anonymise the emerging communities themselves. Indeed, had I not anonymised the emerging communities themselves, a person familiar with these churches could, without much difficulty, ascertain the identity of the individual participants—especially the identity of the leaders in these churches. Anonymising the individual participants in this manner protects their confidentiality, which is critical for this study, since individuals are disclosing their personal experiences in particular faith communities—both the communities from which they emerged and the communities in which they now participate. Thus, in this thesis, I employ pseudonyms for the proper names of these churches, as well as for the various entities such as local cities, other local churches, local cafés, and local affiliated organizations.

Reflexivity

In their work on practical theology and qualitative research, Swinton and Mowat suggest that reflexivity 'is perhaps *the* most crucial dimension of the qualitative research process', impacting every dimension of qualitative research.¹⁹⁹ Defined by Linda Finlay as 'the project of examining how the researcher and intersubjective elements impact on and transform research', reflexivity is the critical gaze that researchers turn towards themselves in the qualitative research process.²⁰⁰ This turn towards examining how the researcher impacts and transforms the research calls into question the original claims of the social sciences, which suggested that the

¹⁹⁸ The guidelines for this assessment are located in Appendix A.

¹⁹⁹ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 59.

²⁰⁰ Linda Finlay, "The Reflexive Journey: Mapping Multiple Routes," in *A Practical Guide for Researchers in Health and Social Sciences*, eds. Linda Finlay and Brendan Gough, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 3-4.

researcher was to be ‘neutral, cut off, objective’²⁰¹ Whereas these earlier ‘objective’ approaches to research sought to limit or abolish the researcher’s subjectivity or presence in studies, the process of reflexivity seeks to acknowledge and account for the researcher’s biases and presence. Because reflexivity has emerged as a defining feature in qualitative research, those who engage in qualitative enquiries,

now accept that the researcher is a central figure who actively constructs the collection, selection and interpretation of data. [Qualitative researchers] appreciate that research is co-constituted—a joint product of the participants, researcher and their relationship. We realize that meanings are negotiated within particular social contexts so that another researcher will unfold a different story.²⁰²

Clearly the above proposals surrounding reflexivity have crucial implications for this project. First, properly situating the researcher within the qualitative research process becomes essential. Second, by engaging in the process of reflexivity, which assumes that the researcher plays a role in the *production* of data, epistemological questions are brought to the surface—questions about the nature of qualitative data themselves and how one comes to know or understand these data. In this section, I first consider the epistemological position that is taken in this research, and then, following from this, consider the impact that I as the researcher have upon this investigation.

Epistemological Position

Social geographer Liz Bondi suggests that generating data through qualitative methods such as interviews and participant observation, which draw upon interpersonal interactions, requires, ‘researchers to use themselves in unique ways since the people with whom they interact are also sentient, feeling human beings’.²⁰³ Thus, according to Bondi, the data generated through qualitative methods are ‘not so much collected as *produced* or *constructed* or *co-constructed*’, since ‘both parties are actively involved in the creation of data in the course of their various

²⁰¹ Ken Plummer, “The Moral and Human Face of Life Stories: Reflexivity, Power and Ethics,” in *Documents of Life 2*, ed. Ken Plummer, (London: Sage, 2001), p. 205.

²⁰² Finlay, “Reflexive Journey,” p. 5.

²⁰³ Liz Bondi, “The Place of Emotions in Research: From Partitioning Emotion and Reason to the Emotional Dynamics of Research Relationships,” in *Emotional Geographies*, eds. Joyce Davidson, Liz Bondi, and Mick Smith, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 236.

interpersonal encounters’.²⁰⁴ As already noted, this requires researchers to reflexively situate themselves within this data generation process. Yet, this view of data generation also requires researchers to consider the epistemological implications of this perspective.

To assert that the researcher is an active co-constructor of data through the qualitative research process invites a larger conversation around the concept of ‘reality’, and how one comes to access or know this reality. The epistemological position that is assumed in the above discussion of qualitative research and reflexivity is an *interpretive constructionist* approach. According to Herbert Rubin and Irene Rubin, this approach expects ‘people to see somewhat different things, examine through distinct lenses and come to somewhat different conclusions’ regarding the world around them.²⁰⁵ They contrast this approach with more *positivist* positions, which assume that ‘objects and events that researchers study exist independently of people’s perceptions and hence there can be only one version that is true’.²⁰⁶ Swinton and Mowat make similar distinctions between constructionist positions and positivist positions, suggesting:

Constructivism assumes that truth and knowledge and the ways in which it is perceived by human beings and human communities is, to a greater or lesser extent, constructed by individuals and communities. In distinction from the epistemology of the natural sciences that assumes a more fixed, stable and external reality, this understanding of knowledge does not assume that reality is something that is somehow ‘out there’, external to the observer, simply waiting to be discovered. Rather it presumes that ‘reality’ is open to a variety of different interpretations and can never be accessed in a pure, uninterpreted form.²⁰⁷

Therefore, constructionist researchers—instead of attempting to move beyond the various perspectives of participants to arrive at the ‘one version that is true’—seek to elicit from participants the views they have of their world, their activities, and the events that they are experiencing and observing.

²⁰⁴ Bondi, “Emotions in Research,” p. 236 [emphasis mine].

²⁰⁵ Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2005), p. 27.

²⁰⁶ Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing*, p. 23.

²⁰⁷ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 35.

Although an interpretive constructionist position is assumed in the discussions of qualitative research and reflexivity above, this epistemological stance can raise issues for practical theologians like Swinton and Mowat, who maintain discernable distinctions between theology and human experience. As argued earlier, correlational approaches to practical theology, which seek to reconcile theology and human experience, actually reinforce dualistic understandings of the relationship between the two. Thus, for Swinton and Mowat, certain interpretive constructionist assumptions have the potential to conflict with theological assumptions regarding knowledge, truth, and reality. Of particular concern for Swinton and Mowat is the relationship between truth as a series of social constructs, and truth as revealed.²⁰⁸ This leads them to suggest the method of mutual critical correlation as a way of reconciling interpretive constructionists assumptions with theological assumptions.

In line with the approach to practical theology argued for in this thesis, which seeks to move beyond the dualisms inherent in the correlational approaches, I maintain that ideas about God cannot be disconnected from the social realities that shape them. Thus, theology is deeply embedded within the everyday language, symbols, and practices of ordinary individuals and communities. This deep connectedness means that theology does not exist independent of these embodied expressions. Therefore, the epistemological position of the interpretive constructionist—which assumes that reality is to be accessed through the perspectives of individuals and communities—is most fitting.

There are other reasons for assuming this epistemological position in this thesis. First, the constructionist position aligns well with the way the research question has been framed. When considering what contributions these emerging churches make to their parent communities' understanding of what it is to be church, I have selected to focus on why those in emerging church left these traditions and what they find meaning in their emerging church communities. Clearly, an epistemological position that assumes the data generated through the research are constructed by individuals

²⁰⁸ See Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 76.

and communities is the proper context for addressing this question. Indeed, both the constructionist position and the questions being asked in this thesis privilege the perspectives of those involved in emerging church. Importantly, this means that the perspectives of emerging church participants are drawn upon in this research to construct not only an understanding of these emerging communities, but also to construct an understanding of the parent communities from which these participants emerged.²⁰⁹ Thus, the dialogue facilitated through the adaptation of Schreier's mechanism is deeply reliant upon data generated through interactions and interviews with emerging church participants.

A second reason for assuming the interpretive constructionist epistemological position in this research is the emphasis that constructionists place upon culture. According to Rubin and Rubin, 'constructionists often pay attention to the shared meanings held by those in a cultural arena—a setting in which people have in common matters such as religion, history, work tasks, confinement in prison, or political interest'.²¹⁰ Indeed, the common expectations and meanings shared by groups of people are of deep concern for constructionist. This focus on locating meaning in these shared perspectives corresponds well with practical theology's recent turn towards culture. Since the approach to practical theology argued for in this thesis sees culture as a key theological category, assuming an epistemological position that is deeply concerned with the way meaning is formed through culture is fitting. Still, as Rubin and Rubin suggest, asking directly about culture is difficult for researchers since it is often taken for granted and invisible, and thus 'researchers have to learn about culture by asking about ordinary events and deducing the underlying rules or definitions from these descriptions'.²¹¹ This too corresponds well with the approach to practical theology argued for in this thesis (i.e., 'theology in the vernacular'), which focuses on the everyday life of a community to discover their principal values, interests, practices, and beliefs. As already noted, I employ the qualitative methods of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups in an effort to make these discoveries. Yet before turning to a discussion of

²⁰⁹ The perspectives that participants have of their parent communities will be corroborated by other research conducted on the tradition from which they emerged.

²¹⁰ Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing*, p. 28.

²¹¹ Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing*, p. 28.

how these methods were employed in generating data, I first must properly situate myself—as researcher—within the qualitative research process.

Accounting for the Researcher

In attempting to account for the researcher in the qualitative process, I follow social geographer Victoria Ingrid Einagel, who argues that ‘researchers never enter the field as neutral or impartial observers but arrive with extensive “baggage” and immediately negotiate complex issues about their positions’.²¹² Thus, acknowledging my own partialities and carefully locating my position as a researcher in these communities is essential. When positioning the researcher in a research project, negotiating one’s status as an ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ is critical.²¹³ I have already discussed my background and personal history with the emerging church phenomenon in the first chapter of this thesis. While this account makes it clear that I entered the field with some first hand familiarity and sympathy for emerging church, I am certainly not an ‘insider’. This is even truer when considering my relationship with the particular communities I researched, as I had not engaged with either *Novitas* or *Common Table* prior to the commencement of my fieldwork. Still, due to my familiarity and affinity with emerging church and the concerns voiced through these communities, I position myself as a ‘sympathetic outsider’.

My position as a sympathetic outsider in this research project has a direct impact on the data that is generated. While I draw explicit attention to this impact in the below discussions on data generation and analysis, at this point I simply wish to acknowledge that each phase of the research is shaped by this perspective. This means that my perspective as a sympathetic outsider influences the details I noticed in observation, the questions I asked in interviews, and the data I deemed significant in analysis. Furthermore, one should expect that an insider or a more critical outsider, would notice different details, ask different questions, and be concerned with different data generated through this research. In addition to impacting the

²¹² Victoria Ingrid Einagel, “Telling Stories, Making Selves,” in *Subjectivities, Knowledges and Feminist Geographies: The Subjects and Ethics of Social Research*, ed. Liz Bondi, (Boulder, Colorado: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), p. 229.

²¹³ See: Joyce Davidson, “‘Joking Apart...’: A ‘Processual’ Approach to Research Self-Help Group” *Social and Cultural Geography* 2, no. 2 (2001): pp. 163-183.

research through what I see, what I ask, and how I interpret the significance of the data, my very presence in the two communities also shapes the research. As I actively participated in the life of these two communities, their complexions changed as a result. Thus, before moving forward with the description of data generation and analysis, it is important to note that the communities of *Novitas* and *Common Table* were uniquely impacted by my presence, and therefore are ‘different’ than they were before or after my involvement. Furthermore, I, as a participant in the life of these communities, was also impacted through the liturgy of these emerging churches and the relationships formed with participants. Consequently I am ‘different’ than I was before my involvement with these emerging churches.

Generating Fieldwork Data

I now turn my attention towards a more detailed treatment of the particular qualitative methods selected for this thesis. As the following discussion of these methods unfolds, I evaluate them in the context of other theologically situated doctoral studies on emerging church. I also continue the process of reflexivity in this section, keeping a critical eye on the role that I, as the researcher, play in carrying out these methods.

Due to the constructed nature of data generated through qualitative research, and the subjective influence that the researcher has on the process, verifying the findings of a study such as this can be difficult. In order to ensure the validity of a qualitative study, and in order to ‘reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation’, educational psychologist Robert Stake suggests that qualitative researchers employ protective procedures, such as ‘redundancy of data gathering’.²¹⁴ He identifies procedures such as these as ‘triangulation’, and argues that qualitative researchers seek multiple perceptions in order to clarify meaning and to validate observations and interpretations. Thus, employing multiple qualitative methods in a single research project becomes an important way for qualitative researchers to bring validity to their findings.

²¹⁴ Robert E. Stake, “Qualitative Case Studies,” in *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, ed. Norman K. Denzin, and Yvonna S. Lincoln, (Los Angeles: Sage Publication, 2008), p. 133.

Given the importance of triangulation in qualitative research, it is not surprising to see a similar combination of qualitative methods being employed by other researchers investigating emerging church. For example, of the eight theologically situated doctoral studies locating their research in actual emerging communities, all but one employ a similar combination of qualitative methods to generate data. Karyn Wiseman's research, which focuses on the liturgical spaces of emerging churches, stands as unique in this regard.²¹⁵ She relied exclusively on survey questionnaires, phone interviews, and website analysis to generate data. Instead of participating in the life of a community, or engaging in direct observation, Wiseman bases her findings on survey results from forty-five emerging communities in the United States. By analysing this data, she determined that smaller emerging communities use coffee houses or private homes for their worship gatherings, whereas larger emerging communities adapt traditional worship spaces or empty warehouses for their liturgical gatherings. Wiseman selected four emerging congregations from the questionnaires to serve as models, and further profiled them, drawing on data generated through phone interviews with community leaders and analysis of their websites.

As already argued, a focus on embodied, everyday practices of emerging communities is needed for this research, therefore exclusively relying upon methods such as survey questionnaires, phone interviews, and website analysis to generate data is not suitable. Instead, I have selected a combination of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups to generate the data for this research. Since a similar combination of qualitative methods are also employed by the seven remaining doctoral studies, in the narrative that follows, I distinguish the manner in which these methods are utilised in this particular thesis. Before turning to this narrative, I must note that other researchers such as Tony Jones, Corey Labanow, and Steve Taylor did select to conduct surveys in order to better understand the demography of the communities they studied.²¹⁶ For this thesis, I selected not to conduct surveys such as these for several reasons. First, I did not wish to draw undue attention to myself as a researcher during my participation, and

²¹⁵ Wiseman, "Grace Space".

²¹⁶ Jones, "Relational Ecclesiology"; Labanow, "Challenges of Reconstruction"; and Taylor, "New Way of Being Church".

conducting a survey would have certainly highlighted the presence of a researcher. Second, given the porous boundaries of emerging communities, attempting to map the demography of a floating population would have been difficult and time consuming compared to value gained. For instance, at what point is an individual considered to be a community participant? Is participation to be based upon a listserv or attendance? If it is attendance, how often and which gatherings must someone attend in order to be considered a participant? Instead this research sought to get a snapshot of the life of the community as it is lived with those who happen to be there during the extended time of observation.

Overview of Research in Two Communities

In January 2009, I embarked on a three-month engagement with the *Novitas* community as a participant observer. A short three weeks after returning from this emerging church, I re-entered the field—arriving at my second site of research with the *Common Table* community at the end of April 2009. This second stint lasted for three and a half months. While the data generation procedures outlined in the following sections apply to both of these contexts, my engagement with two different sites of research raised several issues that need to be addressed at this point. First, this particular project does not represent a strict comparison between the two communities, but rather exists as multidimensional approach to the emerging church phenomenon. As such, I was cautious not to go too far in interpreting my experience at *Common Table* through the lens of *Novitas*. Nevertheless, when first arriving at *Common Table*, I inevitably found myself making natural comparisons between the two and therefore I drew upon this tendency as an aid in surfacing several of the commonalities necessary for constructing a more comprehensive portrayal of the wider emerging church phenomenon. Even while doing this, I remained vigilant not to ‘unfairly’ critique *Common Table* by the subjective standards established through my experiences with the *Novitas* Community.²¹⁷ Second, despite the lingering temptation towards unhelpful comparisons, I did observe that my level of assimilation into *Common Table* was greatly aided by the common cultural and ecclesial experiences that I, as an American, shared with the participants. Still, the

²¹⁷ In particular, many of the potentially ‘unfair’ comparisons resulted from the fact I was comparing my first month of fieldwork at *Common Table*, with my final month of fieldwork at *Novitas*. Naturally, my level of assimilation and ‘comfort’ in the final month of a project such as this was markedly stronger than in the first month.

effect of this commonality presented a double-edged dilemma for my research. Constructively, the deeper level of familiarity aided me in clearly identifying the key ecclesiological influences of this community, as well as the particular ecclesial and cultural elements against which they were reacting. Conversely, my familiarity with this context also had the potential to limit my ability to notice subtle anomalies and ‘below the surface’ details which would appear more pronounced to a less familiar observer. For this reason, when engaged in the early stages of participant observation at *Common Table*, I relied upon an approach similar to the one that was employed in my participation in the *Novitas* community. I now turn my attention towards an account of this common approach. Where differences between the procedures carried out in the two sites of research occur, I note this in the account.

Participant Observation

Upon initially entering each emerging community, I engaged in a period of familiarization facilitated through the methodology of participant observation. This was done in order to acquaint myself with the ‘overall culture, the rules, meaning, and values that underlie and guide behaviour’ within each church before beginning the interview process.²¹⁸ Through participant observation, which continued throughout the duration of my fieldwork, I endeavored to identify the ‘taken-for-granted’ assumptions of each community, as well as the norms or values that seemed contradictory.²¹⁹ Additionally, I considered how the rituals, liturgy, stories and language that these churches drew upon to form meaning related to the wider Christian community.²²⁰ Crucially, my experience as a participant was not limited to the formal gatherings of the two churches, but also included informal gatherings, social activities and encounters via electronic media as well.

Seven of the theologically situated doctoral studies on emerging church also employed some form of participant observation in the data generation process. Yet,

²¹⁸ For the significance of this process prior to interviewing participants, see: Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing*, p. 46.

²¹⁹ Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing*, p. 46.

²²⁰ The precise questions I developed before going into the field, which guided my time as a participant observer, are located in Appendix C.

only four of these studies take an ethnographic approach in applying this method.²²¹ According to John Van Maanen, ethnographic studies provide a rich description, which requires extended time in a particular setting to produce. He argues,

The result of ethnographic inquiry is cultural description. It is, however, a description of the sort that can only emerge from a lengthy period of intimate study and residence in a given social setting. It calls for the language spoken in that setting, first-hand participation in some of the activities that take place there, and, most critically, a deep reliance on intensive work with a few informants drawn from the setting.²²²

While Taylor, Labanow, Morgan, and Steele do take an ethnographic approach to emerging church in their studies, they do not consider emerging church in a multinational setting. As already noted, Labanow and Morgan focus on emerging churches in the U.K., Taylor focuses on an ‘alt-worship’ community in New Zealand, and Steele focuses on emerging churches in the U.S. This thesis provides an ethnographic study of emerging communities in two distinct contexts—the U.K. and the U.S. As also noted, only Whitesel considers emerging church in a multinational context, but due to the number of cases he studies, his consideration is not ethnographically based. My research is ethnographically based—giving the periods of lengthy study, residency, and first-hand participation needed to provide a thick cultural description of these two emerging communities. This ethnographically based method was also required given the approach to practical theology argued for above. If the type of reflection called for in this thesis is concerned with theology that is embedded in the everyday language and symbols of these communities, then spending extended time understanding the language and activities in emerging church is essential.

I relied upon field notes in order to maintain detailed accounts of the observations made during these gatherings. This practice was informed by the work of Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw.²²³ Because the ethnographic nature of

²²¹ Taylor, “New Way of Being Church”; Labanow, “Challenges of Reconstruction”; Morgan, “Emerging Eucharist”; Steele, “Missiology of Emerging Church”.

²²² John Van Maanen, “Fieldwork on the Beat,” in *Varieties of Qualitative Research*, eds. John Van Maanen, James M. Dabbs, and Robert R. Faulkner, (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1982), pp. 102-104.

²²³ Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

participant observation ‘involves both being with other people to see how they respond to events as they happen and experiencing for oneself these events and the circumstances that give rise to them’, writing field notes was not a passive activity whereby I simply recorded ‘the facts’ of what happened.²²⁴ On the contrary, the recording of field notes became a wide-ranging endeavour, in which I actively processed the various encounters, attempting to make sense of the many thoughts, observations, conversations and questions that were emerging through my participation.²²⁵ Because reflexivity is a crucial element of this process, I was careful to situate myself in the writing of these field notes. I also set aside a portion of field note recording process to attend to questions about my own thoughts and emotions that surfaced during the research. These field notes not only became important sets of data when it came to analysing the communities of *Common Table* and *Novitas*, but they also served as a helpful resource in developing questions for the in-depth interviews. I now turn to this portion of the empirical research, outlining the selection of interview participants and the development of the interview schedules.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Since many of the features of emerging church and questions surrounding emerging communities were equally applicable to both contexts, the approach taken in the interviewing stage in *Novitas* and *Common Table* were notably similar. As such, when describing the methodological development of the interviews, I have both communities in mind. Again, where there were differences in my approach between the interviews in *Novitas* and the interviews in *Common Table*, I note this and give my rationale for the variance.

After seven weeks of participant observation in the *Novitas* community, I initiated the interview stage of the research. For *Common Table* this timeline was accelerated—primarily because I drew upon my experiences in Wellingham in order to inform my research in Springfield. As such, I initiated the interviewing stage after only four weeks of participant observation at this latter site. The interviewees in

²²⁴ Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, *Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, pp. 2, 8.

²²⁵ The template used for each field note entry is located in Appendix D. Again, this template was designed based upon the stages outlined by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, *Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, pp. 19-28.

each church were selected in order to provide a diversity of perspective. In conducting seven in-depth interviews in the *Novitas* community and six in-depth interviews in the *Common Table* community, I was deliberate in choosing (1) a mixture of male and female interviewees; (2) a mixture of interviewees who had a partner and interviewees who did not; and (3) a mixture of interviewees who had been a part of the community for a sustained period of time and those who had only begun participating. This was done in order to gain the perspectives of various types of members. These interviews involved both community leaders and participants. They were semi-structured in nature and designed to be between forty-five minutes to one hour in length—although some lasted up to seventy-five minutes. The primary aim of these interviews was to elicit how those within the communities of *Novitas* and *Common Table* conceived of themselves, their beliefs, their practices, their mission, their relationship to other Christian communities and their relationship to the wider culture. This method of qualitative enquiry relates well to the approach to practical theology argued for above. Specifically, the type of theological reflection adopted for this thesis—‘theology in vernacular’—requires a careful listening to how those without specialized training in theology attempt to express and live out their Christian commitments. Thus, conversing with emerging church participants about their own ‘everyday’ efforts to be church provides a clear avenue to achieve these aims.

I relied upon an interview schedule in order to guide the conversation between the respondents and myself.²²⁶ The schedules were comprised of nine categories of questions. The headings to each category were designed as a guide for the interviewer in order to give broad aim to the particular line of enquiry found within the questions that followed. Because there were instances when an interviewee’s response to one question (or sub-question) would also address the material being sought in another question (or sub-question), not every question was directly asked in every interview. Furthermore, the interview schedules were slightly altered for the interviews conducted with the leaders of the two communities.²²⁷ This alteration

²²⁶ The participant interview schedules are located in the appendices of this thesis. See Appendix E and Appendix G.

²²⁷ These leader interview schedules are also located in the appendices of this thesis. See: Appendix F and Appendix H.

primarily entailed changing the phrasing of certain questions, but it also involved adding additional sub-questions. The rationale for employing slightly different interview schedules was two fold. First, because the leaders—as leaders—directed and guided these communities, they occupied a more prominent shaping role. As such, a certain rephrasing of the questions was necessary to account for their more intentional engagement with *Novitas* and *Common Table*. Second, because the leaders of these two communities had undergone formal theological and ministerial training, I was able to ask more direct ecclesiological questions. Even so, the overall aim of each question remained the same for both participants and leaders.

As anticipated, my fieldwork in Wellingham proved beneficial in not only allowing me to accelerate the research timeline in Springfield, but it also provided a template from which to formulate the questions for the interview schedules used in the *Common Table* community. Because many of the features of emerging church and the questions surrounding emerging communities were equally applicable to both contexts, I was able to utilize the interview schedule employed in the *Novitas* community for the interviews conducted in the *Common Table* community with only a few minor adjustments.²²⁸ These adjustments were made primarily for two reasons. First, changing the details—such as city names and community activities—was necessary in order to reflect the *Common Table* context. Second, the schedule was also cut short in order to allow more flexibility in pursuing other lines of inquiry that surfaced throughout each interview. Indeed, as I critically reflected upon my fieldwork in Wellingham, the most significant facet of my research methodology that needed to be addressed was the interview schedule. Ultimately, the interview schedule contained too many questions for the time that had been allotted. This resulted in the interviews becoming ‘a race against the clock’, and therefore I had little freedom to follow interesting points of discussion for fear of running out of time. Even with the concern of running out of time in mind, there were several interviews with the *Novitas* participants in which the conversation diverged such that the engagement with the final category of questions was crucially underdeveloped. Consequently, for the *Common Table* interviews, I pared down the number of sub-

²²⁸ For a comparison of the two interview schedules and a detailed rationale for the adjustments made, see Appendix I and Appendix J.

questions in the schedule in order to allow more freedom to respond to the individual interviewee's insights—resulting in an interview that was more faithful to the semi-structured approach chosen.

Focus Group Validation

Finally, at the conclusion of my time with each community, and after an initial analysis of the data generated, I conducted a focus group interview with six of the community participants. I will say more about the focus group procedures and outcomes in the following chapters, but for now I simply wish to emphasize that the focus groups I conducted served to validate and nuance the research findings.²²⁹ In the three chapters that follow, I develop a thick description of the two emerging communities based upon the data generated through participant observation and interviews. Because the description in these chapters substantially rests upon this empirical research, giving an account of the particulars surrounding the cataloguing and analysis of the data is essential. The final section of this chapter gives an account of how the data from the field was handled.

Treatment of the Data from the Field

As already indicated in the above discussion of practical theology, a central focus of this discipline has been about moving beyond dichotomist conceptions of theology and human experience. This becomes particularly crucial when considering how to treat the qualitative data generated through this research. Other doctoral studies on emerging church have also given specific attention to this question. For instance, Labanow, in his research on emerging church, draws upon correlational models of practical theology in order to navigate the relationship between theology and the human sciences.²³⁰ Specifically, in his treatment of the data, Labanow employs Tracy's mutual critical correlation model—relying on the 'the Chalcedonian pattern' of the relationship between Christ's divinity and humanity outlined earlier to give theology logical precedence over the social sciences.²³¹ As I have already suggested, this approach tends to reinforce the distinctions between theology and human

²²⁹ For more details on the focus group validation procedure and outcomes see chapter four page 174.

²³⁰ Labanow, "Challenges of Reconstruction," pp. 38-79.

²³¹ See the above sections on the emergence and evolution of critical correlation and the challenges of contemporary correlational models.

experience, and thus correlational models such as this are not employed in the treatment of the qualitative data in my research.

Tony Jones, in his research on emerging church, also eschews correlational models of practical theology, and instead employs an approach that relies upon a ‘transversal’ understanding of rationality.²³² Jones locates this particular understanding of rationality between modernist forms of foundationalism and postmodernist forms of extreme relativism—arguing that this form of rationality, while not privileging one paradigm over another, is able to account for the diverse aspects of competing paradigms such as theology and the social sciences.²³³ Drawing on van Huyssteen, Jones argues that ‘rationality really works in more contextual and pragmatic ways than previously assumed’ and asserts that, ‘whether in scientific or theological research programs, rationality is local, experiential, and communally determined’.²³⁴ According to Jones, this localized and communally determined understanding of rationality creates ‘epistemological overlap’ in the research process, which become ‘dialogue points’ where social scientists and theologians can speak meaningfully to one another.²³⁵ While not strictly a correlational approach, by seeking points of dialogue to adjudicate between the competing paradigms, Jones’ treatment continues to perpetuate the perceived divide between theology and data generated through social analysis.

Again, as argued above, the approach to practical theology chosen for this thesis insists upon the deep connectedness between theology and practice, and that the practices of the communities studied are themselves bearers of theology. Thus, the qualitative data generated through the above social scientific methods is treated as theological data in this analysis. Steve Taylor, in his research on an alternative

²³² In arguing for a ‘transversal rationality’ approach to practical theology, Jones draws upon the work of Calvin Schrag and J. Wentzel van Huyssteen. See: Calvin O. Schrag, *The Resources of Rationality: A Response to the Postmodern Challenge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); and J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *The Shaping of Rationality Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999).

²³³ Jones, “Relational Ecclesiology,” pp. 28-32.

²³⁴ Jones, “Relational Ecclesiology,” p 31.

²³⁵ Jones, “Relational Ecclesiology,” p 31.

worship community in New Zealand, also takes this approach. Arguing that ‘the concrete actions of a Christian community are meaningful, value-laden and thus an expression of theology’, Taylor sees validity in ‘the task of articulating theological meaning through the reading of ecclesial practices’.²³⁶ While his treatment of the qualitative data mirrors my own, Taylor’s research focused on only one community, and took place in a different context (New Zealand) from this current research (United Kingdom and United States).

Index of Data

In my three-month engagement with the *Novitas* community as a participant observer I had forty-one distinct encounters with the community—and with community members—in various settings. I also conducted seven in depth interviews with both community leaders and participants. By the time I left the Wellingham site of research on 4 April 2009, I had collected and catalogued one artefact (welcome bag); nine audio or video files that were used by the participants during their worship gatherings; six documents that contain the data of the various websites associated with *Novitas* and *Fulcrum Café*;²³⁷ six documents pertaining to the activities of the community that were collected while I was on site; fifty-seven emails that were sent to those subscribing to the *Novitas* email list;²³⁸ forty-one field note documents that represent the distinct encounters I had with the *Novitas* community; one video I recorded that documents the physical space of the *Fulcrum Café*; eighty-three photos of the city, the *Fulcrum Café*, and the *Novitas* community that I either personally took or collected from other online sources while on site;²³⁹ seven audio recordings of the in-depth interviews conducted while on site;²⁴⁰ and seventeen pieces of

²³⁶ Taylor, “New Way of Being Church,” pp. 18-19.

²³⁷ *Fulcrum Café* is the city centre home of *Novitas* and serves as the place where the community gathers on Wednesday evenings.

²³⁸ This collection of emails does not include ‘private’ correspondence between myself and other *Novitas* participants.

²³⁹ Since my method was that of participant observation, I was conscious not to draw undue attention to myself as a researcher during any sanctioned or informal gathering. Thus, I decided not to take photographs while participating, and as a result I did not take pictures of the community worshipping, socializing, etc. Nevertheless, I was able to glean photos of the community engaging in these practices from various online sources.

²⁴⁰ Approximately six month following the completion of fieldwork at *Novitas*, I made one return trip to Wellingham in order to conduct a focus group designed to validate and nuance my initial findings. This audio recording has also been collected and catalogued alongside the rest of the *Novitas* data.

literature produced by the community that have been electronically scanned into PDF formats.

After returning from Wellingham, I re-entered the field, arriving at my second site of research in Springfield on 27 April 2009. For the next three months, I engaged with the *Common Table* community as a participant and researcher, where I had thirty-one distinct encounters, conducted six in-depth interviews with community members, and facilitated one focus group with the participants to validate and nuance my preliminary findings. Since this was my second site of research, I was able to draw upon and adapt many of the methodologies of research that guided my participation in Wellingham. At the conclusion of my research in Springfield on 4 August 2009, I had collected and catalogued twenty-three audio files that were used by the participants during their gatherings or represented a recording of those gatherings, twenty-one documents that contained the data of the various websites associated with *Common Table*, fourteen documents pertaining to the activities of the community that were collected while I was on site, twenty-seven emails that were sent to those subscribing to the *Common Table* email list,²⁴¹ thirty-one field note documents that represent the distinct encounters I had with the *Common Table* community, three videos I recorded that document the physical spaces occupied by *Common Table*, sixty-two photos of the city of Springfield and the *Common Table* meeting spaces that I either personally took or collected from other online sources while on site, six audio recordings of the in-depth interviews conducted while on site, and one audio recording of the focus group I conducted at the end of my time in Springfield.

Analysis of Data

The above material was imported into the qualitative data analysis program *NVivo*, where it was coded and analysed. Although there were a number of initial questions that guided my time as a research participant and interviewer, instead of using these questions to develop theoretical constructs for analysing the material, I took an inductive approach to the data, developing a portrayal of the two emerging

²⁴¹ Similar to the *Novitas* Fieldwork, this collection of emails did not include ‘private’ correspondence between myself and other *Common Table* participants.

communities through ‘bottom-up coding’.²⁴² This method of coding is more in line with the interpretive constructionist position that informs my overall qualitative approach—particularly the aspects of the research that attempt to elicit the views and perspectives that community participants have of their own ecclesial life. As such, my analysis began with the data generated through interviews and field notes. I systemically examined this material, identifying specific words, phrases and themes in that data and then coded these to free nodes. The free nodes were then grouped together by theme into clusters and—by converting them into tree nodes—a coding structure emerged. This coding structure allowed me to see the data in a manageable form in order to develop a profile of each community. In the development of this profile, I drew upon data such as audio and video files, photographs, emails, artefacts, documents, websites, and community literature in order to augment the initial analysis. The findings that contributed to these community profiles were then arranged in an interview schedule and presented to focus groups made up of community participants in order to validate this stage of the research.

The findings from this analysis were then drawn together to form an initial description of the two emerging churches. While this initial description provided a helpful introduction to these communities, a richer, more detailed presentation of the data was needed in order to offer the thick portrayal called for in this thesis. Thus, I revisited the data generated through this research, developing a separate coding structure in order to answer particular questions. Tree nodes, corresponding to the questions being asked of the data, were then created in *NVivo*. These nodes covered the history and development of these communities, the material culture of these communities, the personal narratives and profiles of community members, the theological conversations and debates that surfaced in these communities, the worship gathering of these communities, and the traditions from which these communities emerged. I then returned to the interviews, field notes, audio files, video files, websites, artefacts, and community literature, coding the data to the appropriate nodes. This new analysis of the data was then combined with the initial analysis to produce a thicker, richer portrayal of these two emerging churches. I

²⁴² For more information on this procedure, see: Carl F. Auerback and Louise B. Silverstein, *Qualitative Data: An Introduction to Coding and Analysis* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), pp. 135-137.

present these findings from the field, detailing the *Novitas* community in chapter four and the *Common Table* community in chapter five. Before turning to this presentation however, I first establish an ecclesial context for these two communities by outlining the history and development of the wider emerging church phenomenon in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: History and Development of Emerging Church

In this chapter I trace the history and development of the wider emerging church phenomenon—situating the communities of *Novitas* and *Common Table* within this account. Since these communities are located in the United Kingdom and the United States, the following narrative focuses specifically on the development of emerging church in these two contexts.

Precursory Literature on Emerging Church

In his research on emerging churches in the United States, Josh Packard argues that the spirit and ethos of emerging churches today can be traced back to the 1970 publication of *The Emerging Church* by Bruce Larson and Ralph Osborne.²⁴³ Packard recognizes several contemporary emerging church emphases in Larson and Osborne—specifically drawing attention to three ecclesial principles that surface in this text. First, in choosing the designation ‘emerging church’ Larson and Osborne are promoting ‘neither a return to some idyllic golden age of the church or any particular “right” conception of how church should be in the future’.²⁴⁴ On the contrary, Larson and Osborne are suggesting that ‘the Church is in a process, moving toward a fulfillment of its calling’.²⁴⁵ Packard suggests this interpretation of church ‘inherently guards against static statements or arrangements’, and ultimately places the resistance of institutionalization at the very core of Larson and Osborne’s understanding of church.²⁴⁶

A second emphasis that Packard detects in the 1970 text *The Emerging Church*—which he connects back to expressions of emerging church today—is Larson and Osborne’s continual (and explicit) contrasting between their concept of emerging church and the experiences these two authors had in more traditional and institutional

²⁴³ Josh Packard, “Organizational Structure, Religious Belief, and Resistance: the Emerging Church” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2008), p. 60. Larson and Osborn’s text: Bruce Larson and Ralph Osborne, *The Emerging Church* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1970).

²⁴⁴ Packard, “Organizational Structure,” p. 61.

²⁴⁵ Larson and Osborne, *Emerging Church*, p. 11.

²⁴⁶ Since ‘resisting institutionalism’ is the primary lens that Packard uses to interpret contemporary emerging churches, this observation fits well with his analysis. Packard, “Organizational Structure,” p. 61.

forms of church.²⁴⁷ This juxtaposing of emerging church with traditional or institutional forms of church is something that Packard sees being clearly present in contemporary expressions of emerging church as well. A similar juxtaposing can be seen in Robert Warren's 1995 work *Being Human, Being Church*.²⁴⁸ In this text, which Packard does not examine, Warren distinguishes 'emerging church' from 'inherited church', in his attempt to differentiate between a church poised for the challenges of postmodernity ('emerging church'), and a church better fitted for the structures of the modern period ('inherited church').

Returning to Packard, his final analysis of the similarities focuses on what he identifies as 'a reliance on integration as opposed to differentiation' found in the language of both Larson and Osborne, and in the language of contemporary emerging church participants. By comparing data generated through his research with the writings of Larson and Osborne, Packard found that 'either-or' distinctions were frequently jettisoned by both groups in favour of a stated preference for 'both-and' approaches.²⁴⁹

While Packard's comparisons between contemporary expressions of emerging church and the 1970 Larson and Osborn text *The Emerging Church* surfaces a number of noteworthy parallels, drawing a direct link from this work to the individuals and communities associated with the present emerging church phenomenon is problematic. There is little evidence to suggest that early emerging church participants were even aware of Larson and Osborn's work, much less drawing upon it as a resource or guide.²⁵⁰ In fact, even Packard himself recognizes that the 1970s text *The Emerging Church* was not among the more widely read

²⁴⁷ Packard, "Organizational Structure," p. 61.

²⁴⁸ Robert Warren, *Being Human, Being Church: Spirituality and Mission in the Local Church* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1995).

²⁴⁹ Packard, "Organizational Structure," p. 61.

²⁵⁰ Similar comments could be made in regards to Robert Warren's *Being Human, Being Church*, although Ian Mobsby does recognize this text as being influential in the formation of the emerging community *Moot* in London. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (London: SPCK, 2006), p. 291.

foundational texts for those involved in the current emerging church phenomenon.²⁵¹ In this thesis, I follow the research of Eddie Gibbs, Ryan K. Bolger, Matthew Guest, Steve Taylor, and Bryan D. Spinks, locating the genesis of contemporary emerging church phenomena in Sheffield, England's experimental *Nine O'clock Service* (NOS).²⁵² Even if NOS was not the first alternative worship group, researchers regularly trace the origins of postmodern worship back to this collective—with Gibbs and Bolger actually identifying it as the 'first emerging church'.²⁵³

Emergence and Influence of the Nine O'clock Service

Following a series of 'renewal' gatherings in Sheffield in the fall of 1985—led by the southern California Vineyard Movement leader John Wimber, and hosted by St. Thomas Crooke's Anglican Church—Robert Warren, the vicar of St. Thomas, convinced the members of the recently established *Nairn Street Community* to begin leading a church service on Sundays at 9:00pm, with the aim of reaching young adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty.²⁵⁴ The *Nairn Street Community*, led by Chris Brain, was comprised of approximately thirty people 'who lived a common life, sharing incomes and discussing religion and the Bible'.²⁵⁵ Brain quickly became the leader of this new service (NOS) and was 'ordained on a fast track'.²⁵⁶ Yet, soon after the inception of NOS, the service (and the community that emerged from it) lost all discernable links to St. Thomas, and without supervision or oversight, a cult-like climate developed within NOS, leading to its ultimate collapse in a highly publicized sex scandal in 1995.²⁵⁷ Still, the influence and impact that NOS had on the formation and shaping of emerging church is unmistakable.

²⁵¹ Despite the absence of a direct link between Larson and Osborn and contemporary emerging church phenomena, Packard maintains that 'many of the founding ideas and concepts, such as the emphasis on active participation over passive consumption, and equality and ability over training and credentials, were present in the early 1970s'. Packard, "Organizational Structure," pp. 61-62.

²⁵² See: Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*; Matthew Guest and Steve Taylor, "The Post-Evangelical Emerging Church: Innovations in New Zealand and the UK," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6, no. 1 (March 2006): 49-64; and Bryan D. Spinks, *The Worship Mall: Contemporary Responses to Contemporary Culture*, Kindle ed. (New York: Church Publishing, 2011).

²⁵³ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, p. 82. See Also: Spinks, *Worship Mall*, p. 32.

²⁵⁴ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, p. 82

²⁵⁵ Spinks, *The Worship Mall*, p. 32.

²⁵⁶ Spinks, *The Worship Mall*, p. 33.

²⁵⁷ See: Roland Howard, *The Rise and Fall of the Nine O'clock Service: A Cult Within the Church?* (London: Mowbray, 1996).

Through their contribution to the Greenbelt Festivals in the late 1980s and early 1990s, NOS's highly creative liturgies—which drew heavily from the forms of music, dance, video and style found within British club culture—began gaining wide recognition amongst individuals who would go on to participate in and lead emerging communities in the U.K. For instance, early emerging church leaders in the U.K. like Paul Roberts (*Resonance*, Bristol), Andy Thornton (*Late Late Service*, Glasgow), Sue Wallace (*Visions*, York), Mal Calladine (*Tribal Generation*, Sheffield), Simon Hall (*Revive*, Leeds), and Ian Mobsby (*Moot*, London) were all directly influenced by their encounters with NOS.²⁵⁸ Sue Wallace helpfully explains how these experiences with NOS served as an impetus for the emergence of similar alternative worship communities in the early 1990s:

NOS was a catalyst (either directly or indirectly) for people to see what was possible for multimedia worship. Seeing the Nine O'clock Service at Greenbelt in 1988 was an inspiring and life-changing moment. Our ideas of what worship should look, sound, and feel like were turned on their heads by seeing this amazing, loud, multimedia service that at the same time was deeply worshipful.²⁵⁹

This contextualized worship experience had a similar impact on Simon Hall, who wrote:

I was a fairly regular twenty-year-old Christian, continuing to live in a dualistic world of Graham Kendrick's music and a group named the Cure, somehow managing to balance my life outside the church (the darkly beautiful world of goth and Indie) with the very different environment within the sacred walls. The walls fell down that summer [at the Greenbelt Festival in 1988], and I knew there was no way back for me: no way that I could ever again eagerly expect the latest Vineyard songbook, no way that I could live the enforced lie that my church was relevant. I was ruined. Many people my age and older saw in NOS a hope for a different kind of church.²⁶⁰

Not only does this comment by Hall demonstrate the deep and lasting influence NOS had on future emerging church participants, but it also highlights the particular ecclesial context out of which those impacted by NOS were emerging. With references to 'Graham Kendrick's music' and the 'Vineyard songbook', Hall

²⁵⁸ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, pp. 82-87. See also: Sue Wallace, "Alternative Worship and the Story of Visions in York," in *Fresh Expressions in the Sacramental Tradition*, ed. Steven Croft and Ian Mobsby, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009), pp. 9-15.

²⁵⁹ Sue Wallace quoted in: Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, p. 86.

²⁶⁰ Simon Hall quoted in: Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, pp. 84-85.

signifies his background in the more charismatic and evangelical wings of the churches. According to Spinks, both the music of prolific songwriter Graham Kendrick and ‘Vineyard Music’ (i.e., the music that arose out of Wimber’s Association of Vineyard Churches and the dozens of albums produced under the Vineyard label) were prevalent forms of charismatic worship in the U.S. and the U.K.²⁶¹ That many of these alternative worship groups arose out of the charismatic (and evangelical) wings of the churches is affirmed by Jonny Baker, Doug Gay, and Jenny Brown in their work on alternative worship. Even though these groups were highly influenced by other worship traditions—traditions that Baker, Gay, and Brown loosely define as ‘catholic’—these authors maintain that many of the individuals participating in alternative worship came from ‘the mainstream of charismatic-evangelical Christianity’.²⁶² In fact, according to Matthew Guest and Steve Taylor, it is the participant’s disillusionment with evangelicalism that turns them towards alternative worship—which they perceive to be ‘a post-modern response to the shortcomings of mainstream evangelicalism’.²⁶³ Guest and Taylor go on to explain just how alternative worship offers those participating a preferable substitute to specific evangelical shortcomings:

Most notably, these have included a reaction against the evangelical preference for the spoken word; a tendency towards ‘paternalistic’ authority structures; a tendency to exclude those who do not conform to conventional social mores or theological perspectives; and a persistent habit of avoiding engagement with cultural and technological innovations. In response, alt.worship groups, while far from uniform, share a general mission strategy centred on forms of Christian worship that are culturally aware and which challenge the boundaries of faith by exploring spiritual experience, while creating communities that are supportive and affirming of those whose identities are frequently labelled as ‘other’ by the evangelical mainstream. .²⁶⁴

As NOS’s reputation expanded, so did their influence—which virally spread beyond those early emerging church participants who had directly encountered their services,

²⁶¹ Spinks, *The Worship Mall*, pp. 91-124.

²⁶² Jonny Baker, Doug Gay, and Jenny Brown, *Alternative Worship* (London: SPCK, 2003), p. ix.

²⁶³ Guest and Taylor, “Post-Evangelical Emerging Church,” p. 50.

²⁶⁴ Guest and Taylor, “Post-Evangelical Emerging Church,” pp. 50-51.

to inspire a number of other individuals in the nascent emerging church phenomenon. Dave Tomlinson (*Holy Joes*, London), whose text *The Post-Evangelical* expressed the ecclesial and theological attitudes of many within emerging churches,²⁶⁵ wrote, ‘We knew of NOS in those days and greatly admired what they were doing, though none of us had ever been there. But they were an inspiration’.²⁶⁶ New Zealander blogger and emerging church chronicler, Andrew Jones (www.tallskinnykiwi.com), who was working in California during NOS’s rise in prominence, echoed Tomlinson’s account, saying, ‘I had heard about it when I was doing rave worship in California and was inspired by the fact that the Brits were actually doing it’.²⁶⁷ As a result of reports such as these, and through the influence of other alternative worship communities in the U.K., North American emerging church participants began to see parallels between what was taking place in the U.K. and what was taking place in the U.S. In fact, Tony Jones, the former national coordinator for *Emergent Village* and current theologian in residence at *Solomon’s Porch*, an emerging community in Minnesota, was first exposed to the emerging developments in the U.K. through Johnny Baker (*Grace*, London). Baker, an exponent of alternative worship,²⁶⁸ who locates his influences in the Greenbelt Festival and Glasgow’s *Late Late Service*,²⁶⁹ was involved with several youth conferences in the U.S. It was there that he introduced U.S. youth leaders to an interactive labyrinth that he had been using in alternative worship gatherings in the U.K.²⁷⁰ According to Tony Jones, Baker’s ‘influence was immediately felt’ within the emerging church networks in the U.S.—not only as a result of his labyrinth exhibition, but also because of his internet presence as one of the early emerging church bloggers.²⁷¹

²⁶⁵ Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical* (London: Triangle, 1995). For an account of how Tomlinson’s vision for a post-evangelical church that will allow space for individuals to think through matters of faith in relation to their experiences has intersected with alternative worship groups, see: Guest and Taylor, “Post-Evangelical Emerging Church,” 49-64.

²⁶⁶ Dave Tomlinson cited in: Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, p. 317.

²⁶⁷ Andrew Jones quoted in: Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, p. 86.

²⁶⁸ See: Baker, Gay, and Brown, *Alternative Worship*.

²⁶⁹ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, p. 242.

²⁷⁰ For information on this Labyrinth see: Labyrinth, “Intro,” <http://www.labyrinth.org.uk/> (accessed 31 May 2012).

²⁷¹ Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches From the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008), p. 51.

Organic Development Facilitated Via the Internet

Crucially, Jones' reference to Baker's presence on the internet reveals just how powerful this medium was in the formation and development of emerging church.

As John Drane explains:

The emerging church would certainly not be what it now is, were it not for the worldwide web that has facilitated the organic growth of an international network of individuals and groups who are exchanging ideas about it on a daily basis. Indeed, without ready access to this form of instant communication, the emerging church may not exist at all.²⁷²

Kate Simcox, whose research focuses on how participants in the emerging church phenomenon use online weblogs to form their conceptions of God outside existing forms of Christianity, offers a poignant anecdote that helps demonstrate the abundant and reflective nature of emerging church conversation taking place on the World Wide Web. In the early stages of her research, after searching the internet for months for words to describe 'individuals constructing alternatives to church as most people understand it', Simcox 'somewhat randomly' entered a search for 'emerging church' and was 'overwhelmed' by the result.²⁷³ Even though she had never encountered the term *emerging church* before, her search revealed an overwhelmingly 'complex network of connections and discussions' occurring in interactive online spaces. Simcox was struck by 'the insightful, activist, evocative, artistic, and self-reflexive sagas that gushed forth', and by the daily endeavors of the participants 'to come to know and make relevant the Christian faith in a time of relativism and cultural instability'.²⁷⁴ Researching emerging church in a North American context, Simcox highlighted the early influence that websites like *Emergent Village* (www.emergentvillage.org), *The Ooze* (www.theooze.com), and *The Next Wave* (www.the-next-wave.org) had on emerging church participants. She recognizes that these websites (and others) 'have been essential to emerging church development because they provide a communication network to mobilize the efforts of the movement'.²⁷⁵ While Simcox also engages with international blogger Andrew

²⁷² John Drane, "Editorial: The Emerging Church," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6, no. 1 (March 2006): p. 9.

²⁷³ Kate D. Simcox, "Performing Postmodern Christian: Communication in the Emerging Church and the Renegotiation of Divine Knowledge" (PhD Diss., Bowling Green State University, 2005), p. 56.

²⁷⁴ Simcox, "Performing Postmodern Christian," pp. 56-57.

²⁷⁵ Simcox, "Performing Postmodern Christian," p. 63.

Jones (www.tallskinnykiwi.com), the majority of her analysis remains focused around the U.S. websites. Yet, similarly influential websites, such as *Small Fire* (www.smallfire.org) and *Emerging Church Info* (www.emergingchurch.info), existed in the U.K., and served a similar function—connecting those involved in the early expressions of emerging church throughout the U.K. and the West.

Structural Development of Emerging Church

Even though the internet had organically facilitated this ecclesial conversation between various youth orientated individuals and groups on either side of the Atlantic, the origins and development of emerging church in the U.S. followed a slightly different trajectory than emerging church in the U.K. While alternative worship groups such as *Grace* (London), *Late Late Service* (Glasgow), *Visions* (York), *The Third Sunday Service* (Bristol), and *Vaux* (London), were forming across Britain in the early to mid nineties, prominent evangelical youth leaders such as Doug Pagitt, Brad Cecil, Andrew Jones, Chris Seay, and Mark Driscoll began gathering with one another to discuss the postmodern shifts taking place within American culture.²⁷⁶ During this period, a small number of Christian leaders from across the U.S., most of whom were under the age of thirty, began interacting with one another through a sequence of conferences and gatherings sponsored by *The Leadership Network*—an association committed to identifying, connecting and helping ‘high-capacity Christian leaders multiply their impact’.²⁷⁷ Tony Jones, in his doctoral research on emerging church, has identified this initial gathering of leaders under the umbrella of *The Leadership Network* as the first of three stages in the development of emerging church.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁶ Jones, *New Christians*, pp. 42-44.

²⁷⁷ See: Leadership Network, “Our Mission,” http://www.leadnet.org/about_OurMission.asp (accessed 29 April 2010). According to early emerging church pioneer Dan Kimball, a *Leadership Network* gathering was the first place the term ‘emerging church’ was used to describe this new phenomenon, claiming that the network employed it as their conference slogan in 1997 — ‘advance scouts for the emerging church’. Dan Kimball, “Origin of the terms ‘Emerging’ and ‘Emergent’ church - Part 1,” Vintage Faith Blog, entry posted 20 April 2006, http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2006/04/origin_of_the_t.html (accessed 28 September 2007).

²⁷⁸ Importantly Jones himself was a participant in this group. Anthony Hawthorne Jones, “The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement in Practical Theological Perspective” (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2011) [Kindle version: Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (2011), pp. 44-45.]

The Young Leaders Network

Jones situates the origins of emerging church in the U.S. against the backdrop of thriving evangelical mega-churches, who, by the early 1990s, had established ‘a strong foothold in the suburbs’.²⁷⁹ Yet, in spite of this success, the leaders of these mega-churches became concerned in the mid 90s that younger generations of Christians, who had left their congregations during their university years, were not returning to church as (it was assumed) older generations had. Jones explains:

a contingent of the most influential mega-church pastors had noticed a trend that, in their opinion, GenXers were not following the Baby Boomer pattern of dropping out of church in college, only to rejoin church when they married, settled in the suburbs, and had children. Whether this was actually a trend among Baby Boomers is disputed, but it was at least the assumption of these suburban mega-church pastors. GenXers raised in the church were indeed dropping out of their parents’ churches in college, if not before, but they were not coming back to church in their twenties.²⁸⁰

In response to this, some evangelical mega-church pastors turned to *The Leadership Network* for help in deciphering and addressing these perceived trends. According to Jones’ research, in 1997 *The Leadership Network* hired Doug Pagitt, a youth leader from a prominent evangelical church in Minnesota, to form and lead a ‘Young Leaders Network’.²⁸¹ Pagitt then spent the next two years traveling the U.S., seeking to locate and learn from the more innovative pastors working with younger generations of Christians. The group of young leaders he assembled during this process, which included Tony Jones (*Solomon’s Porch*, Minneapolis), Mark Driscoll (*Mars Hill Church*, Seattle), Dan Kimball (*Vintage Faith Church*, Santa Cruz), and Brian McLaren (*Cedar Ridge Community Church*, Spencerville, MD) became the nucleus of the emerging church phenomenon in the U.S.²⁸²

Although linked together under the auspices of *The Leadership Network*, the individuals that Pagitt assembled to form *The Young Leaders Network* quickly found themselves in disharmony with their parent organization. Jones attributes this

²⁷⁹ Jones, “Relational Ecclesiology,” p. 44.

²⁸⁰ Jones, “Relational Ecclesiology,” p. 44

²⁸¹ Jones, “Relational Ecclesiology,” p. 45.

²⁸² Jones, “Relational Ecclesiology,” p. 45.

tension to the theological and philosophical explorations of those who made up *The Young Leaders Network*. Whereas *The Leadership Network* had chosen to avoid theological issues in favour of addressing more pragmatic and practical concerns that churches faced, those participating in *The Young Leaders Network* were engaging the work of post-liberal theologians, such as Stanley Hauerwas, George Lindbeck, and Hans Frei, and postmodern philosophers like Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, and John D. Caputo.²⁸³ These explorations, and the ‘abrasive’ way they manifested themselves in public events hosted by *The Young Leaders Network*, sat uneasily with many in *The Leadership Network*, causing tensions between the two entities.

Josh Packard also situates the U.S. emerging church phenomenon against the backdrop of mega-churches in the 1990s, noting how emerging communities developed out of their dissatisfaction with particular aspects of these larger congregations. He suggests that,

Despite the massive and growing popularity of [mega-church] congregations, some people were left unsatisfied by this manifestation of church. Although it offered an alternative to traditional worship services, it did not offer an alternative way of doing church. The Emerging Church grew out of a response to this kind of consumeristic, leader driven, ‘seeker-sensitive’ approach to church.²⁸⁴

Although various attempts were made to repair the strained relationship between *The Leadership Network* and the younger leaders who had grown dissatisfied with mega-churches, these never succeeded. Thus, those participating in *The Young Leaders Network* morphed into an organization called the *Terra Nova Project* after Pagitt left *The Leadership Network* to start an emerging community in Minneapolis (*Solomon’s Porch*).²⁸⁵ According to Jones, *A New Kind of Christian*, Brian McLaren’s best selling book,²⁸⁶ was ‘released under an imprint of Leadership Network in 2001’, and

²⁸³ Jones, “Relational Ecclesiology,” pp. 45-46.

²⁸⁴ Packard, “Organizational Structure,” pp. 43-44.

²⁸⁵ Jones, “Relational Ecclesiology,” p. 46. See also: Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, p. 32. For an excellent insider’s account of the transitions that took place during this period see Jones, *New Christians*, pp. 41-51.

²⁸⁶ Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

that marked ‘the last official partnership’ between *The Leadership Network* and those individuals who would later become the founding members of *Emergent Village*.²⁸⁷

Emergent Village

The formal parting with *The Leadership Network*, the formation of *Emergent Village*, and the popularity of Brian McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian*, all combine together in 2001 to signify the beginning of Jones’ second stage in the development of the emerging church phenomenon in the U.S. In his research, Jones identifies several key features that characterize this second phase. First, he notes the rise in prominence of emerging church within American evangelicalism and beyond. Jones illustrates this increase in attention by noting that,

Brian McLaren was given a regular column in *Leadership*, a *Christianity Today International* periodical, and his books were analyzed in a series of articles in the parent publication. Another article, this time highlighting Doug Pagitt and *Solomon’s Porch*, appeared on the cover of the *New York Times* in 2004, and Tim Keel and *Jacob’s Well* appeared on the *Christian Century*’s cover in 2006. International speaking engagements followed for many of the leaders of *Emergent Village*, as well as those tangentially connected to the movement.²⁸⁸

A second feature that characterized this stage in the development of emerging church was the rising importance of *Emergent Village*. After stabilizing by the early 2000s, this organization emerged as a nucleus for not only the core group of participants who had migrated from *The Young Leaders Network*, but also for the wider North American emerging church phenomenon—with the nomenclature ‘emergent church’ often replacing ‘emerging church’ in United States ecclesiastical parlance.²⁸⁹ Jones, in his research, highlights the well-attended national conferences put on by *Emergent*

²⁸⁷ Jones, “Relational Ecclesiology,” p. 46.

²⁸⁸ Jones, “Relational Ecclesiology,” pp. 47-48. The articles that Jones is referring to are: John Leland, “Hip New Churches Sway to a Different Drummer,” *New York Times*, 18 February 2004; and Jason Byassee, “Emerging Model: a Visit to Jacob’s Well,” *Christian Century* 123, no. 19 (19 September 2006): 20-24.

²⁸⁹ Some researchers and practitioners contest the use of ‘emergent church’ in this manner. See for instance Scot McKnight, “What is the Emerging Church?” (paper presented at the Fall Contemporary Issues Conference, Westminster Theological Seminary, 26-27 October 2006), <http://www.foolishsage.com/wp-content/uploads/McKnight%20-%20What%20is%20the%20Emerging%20Church.pdf> (accessed 18 April 2007). See also the personal correspondence between Ray Anderson and Dan Kimball dated 2 November 2005 in Ray S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2007), p. 14.

Village and the twelve books they released from 2001-2008 as examples of the organization's deepening influence on the development of emerging church.²⁹⁰ Emergent Village also established an organizational presence in the U.K. through Brian McLaren's visits to conferences in London at the invitation of Jason Clark in 2001.²⁹¹ In 2003, Clark, a Vineyard Church pastor, became the point person for *Emergent-UK*, a sister network to *Emergent Village*.²⁹² Through this alliance, and through Clark's consultation with emerging participants in North America, emerging communities in the U.S. and the U.K. continued their mutual influence on one another.²⁹³

A final feature in what Jones describes as the second stage of emerging church development was the distancing of some evangelicals in the U.S. from the 'emerging church' appellation in reaction to the more progressive theology espoused by those appropriating the 'emergent' nomenclature. Jones sees specific examples of this occurring in Mark Driscoll's leaving of *Emergent Village* and his subsequent denunciation of the group, as well as *Christianity Today International's* negative appraisal of many of the works being produced by *Emergent Village* leaders.²⁹⁴

John Alan Duncan and Terrance Steele also recognize this rupture in their research, and have suggested that different strains of emerging church evolved as a result. While acknowledging that emerging church insiders and emerging church observers see these variations differently, Steele places the divergent strains of emerging church into two broad categories, 'emerging evangelicals' and 'emergents'.²⁹⁵ Steele argues that although the former group remained evangelical in their theology, they distinguished themselves from other evangelicals through ecclesiological and missiological adaptations—with the aim of 'attracting members of the emerging

²⁹⁰ Jones, "Relational Ecclesiology," p. 47.

²⁹¹ Jones, *New Christians*, p. 54.

²⁹² *Emergent-UK* dissolved in 2009 as Jason Clark moved on to pursue other projects. See: Emergent-UK, "Home," <http://www.emergent-uk.org> (accessed 5 June 2012).

²⁹³ Jones, *New Christians*, p. 54.

²⁹⁴ Jones, "Relational Ecclesiology," p. 48.

²⁹⁵ Terrance Steele, "The Missiology of the Emerging Church in Portland, Oregon" (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2012), pp. 99-100.

culture through contextualizations of the gospel and methodological changes'.²⁹⁶ Duncan, drawing on categories established by Baptist missiologist Ed Stetzer, labels this group as 'relevants' or 'reconstructionists'.²⁹⁷ He suggests that 'relevants are often theologically conservative and focused more on updating worship styles, preaching styles, and leadership models than reshaping theology', and 'reconstructionists are essentially theologically evangelical but dissatisfied with the evangelical church', leading them to question the current forms of evangelical ecclesiology.²⁹⁸ As for the 'emergents' classification, Steele argues that those in this category self-identified as emergent churches and not only differentiated themselves from other evangelicals in their ecclesiological and missiological adaptations, but also in their theology. Duncan labels this group as 'revisionists', and like Steele, argues that those in this strain 'question key evangelical doctrines'—such as the substitutionary theory of the atonement.²⁹⁹ Furthermore, researchers such as Scott Bader-Saye recognized a notable 'post-evangelical' accent within much of the emerging church experience, noting how various emerging communities—particularly those located within the non-denominational ranks—embodied 'a conscious reaction against evangelical theology and subculture'.³⁰⁰

Presently, there is little evidence that 'emerging evangelicals' are intent on retaining the 'emerging' appellation, and as Jones has argued, many evangelicals abandoned this label during the second stage of the development of emerging church. Still, as these departures were occurring amongst evangelicals, those within the U.S. mainline churches were becoming more aware of emerging church. Young leaders within Protestant denominations such as *Presbyterian Church (USA)*, the *Episcopal Church*, and the *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* began linking together under the

²⁹⁶ Steele, "Missiology of Emerging Church," p. 100.

²⁹⁷ John Alan Duncan, "A Critical Analysis of Preaching in the Emerging Church" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, May 2011), p. 44. See also: Ed Stetzer and David Putnam, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006).

²⁹⁸ Duncan, "Critical Analysis," pp. 44-45.

²⁹⁹ Duncan, "Critical Analysis," p. 45.

³⁰⁰ Scott Bader-Saye, "Improvising Church: An Introduction to the Emerging Church Conversation," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6, no. 1 (March 2006): pp. 13-14.

emergent umbrella, developing denominationally specific cohorts like *Presbysmergent*, *Anglimergent*, and *Luthermergent*.³⁰¹

This movement from the evangelical wings of the churches into the protestant mainlines—along with the replacing of *Emergent Village*'s board of directors with the next generation of leaders—marks the beginning of the third (and current) stage of development within emerging church. Beginning in 2009, this stage has, according to Jones, seen emerging church woven 'into the very fabric of American Protestantism, making it less noticeable, but just as powerful, as a movement'.³⁰² Thus, as the influence of emerging church spreads and diversifies, core characteristics of this phenomenon, such as an evangelical heritage, are becoming less perceptible. In fact, in a recent *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* survey, 'Emergent church' in the United States was identified as a non-denomination church group in the *mainline* protestant tradition.³⁰³ Although this classification fails to acknowledge the evangelical heritage of emerging church, it is not without warrant, as a notable portion of these communities appropriate a mixture of liturgical rites, ecclesial practices and theological paradigms from mainline protestant traditions.

Novitas and Common Table

In the next two chapters, I provide a thorough depiction of the *Novitas* and *Common Table* communities. Yet, before turning to an in-depth portrayal of these emerging churches I first provide the ecclesial context for *Novitas* and *Common Table*, locating them within the above narrative.

Novitas

Properly situating the *Novitas* community within the wider emerging church phenomenon requires a cursory excursion into the recently developed *Fresh Expressions* initiative. This project, which began in 2004, exists as a collaborative partnership between the Church of England and the Methodist Church of Great

³⁰¹ Jones, "Relational Ecclesiology," p. 48.

³⁰² Jones, "Relational Ecclesiology," p. 49.

³⁰³ Luis Lugo, et.al., *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey / Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic*, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, February 2008, <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf> (accessed on 17 May, 2010), p. 105.

Britain.³⁰⁴ Though the formation of *Novitas* predates the formal advent of *Fresh Expressions* by three years, the latter serves as an important framework for interpreting this emerging church. Even so, I wish to be cautious here in the way that I employ *Fresh Expressions* as a paradigm for interpreting *Novitas*. In my own research, I do not recognize a one-to-one correlation between ‘fresh expressions of church’ and ‘emerging church’—most notably because of the institutional origins and hierarchical *modus operandi* of the former. Indeed, the relationship between the two entities is interlaced with apprehension arising from incongruent expectations and sympathies between the two.³⁰⁵ Nevertheless, *Novitas* is a *Fresh Expressions* initiative and exploring this community through the *Fresh Expressions* lens provides a suitable, although incomplete, profile.

Convened during 2002 in response to an already existing array of innovative forms of church that were emerging within the Church of England, a new working group was commissioned to assess these experimental forms of church.³⁰⁶ The assumption guiding this group suggested that the parochial system, while still a vital component of the Church’s mission, no longer adequately addressed the diverse needs of contemporary culture. Following the language of Archbishop Rowan Williams, the working group insists that the inauguration of *Fresh Expressions* does not signal an end to the parochial system in England, but rather points to a ‘mixed economy’ of established church and emerging church.

It is clear to us that the parochial system remains an essential and central part of the national Church’s strategy to deliver incarnational mission. But the existing parochial system alone is no longer able

³⁰⁴ See: Fresh Expressions “About Us,” <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/section.asp?id=3019&cachefixer> (accessed 19 March 2009). Following the suggested reference guidelines put forward by Steven Croft, I use the capitalized ‘Fresh Expressions’ to denote the national UK initiative of the Church of England and the Methodist Church. When referencing actual fresh expression communities, I employ the lower-case term ‘fresh expressions of church’. Steven Croft, “Fresh Expressions in a Mixed Economy Church: a Perspective,” in *Mission-Shaped Questions: Defining Issues for Today’s Church*, ed. Steven Croft (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), p. 15.

³⁰⁵ See: Peter Rollins, “Biting the Hand That Feeds: An Apology for Encouraging Tension Between the Established Church and Emerging Collectives,” in *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church*, ed. Louise Nelstrop and Martin Percy (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008).

³⁰⁶ Church of England’s Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), p. xi. Graham Cray chaired this working group—comprised of representation from both the Anglican and Methodist church—which sought to ‘reflect on the changes which had taken place since the 1994 report on church planting’. Croft, “Fresh Expressions,” p. 2.

fully to deliver its underlying mission purpose. We need to recognize that a variety of integrated missionary approaches is required. A mixed economy of parish churches and network churches will be necessary, in an active partnership across a wider area, perhaps a deanery. In addition, our diverse consumer culture will never be reached by one standard form of church.³⁰⁷

In cataloguing these new forms of church, the Mission-Shaped Church working group identified the following types of ecclesial communities as ‘fresh expressions’ of church: Alternative Worship Communities, Base Ecclesial Communities, Café Church, Cell Church, churches arising out of community initiatives (both out of community projects, and the restructuring or re-founding of an existing church to serve a community), multiple and midweek congregations, network-focused churches (churches connecting with specific networks), school-based and school-linked congregations and churches, Seeker Church, traditional church plants, traditional forms of church inspiring new interest (including New Monastic Communities), Youth Congregations.³⁰⁸ These fresh expressions of church are varied and represent a miscellaneous constituency of ecclesiastical communities—many of which I quickly distinguish from emerging church. Because *Fresh Expressions* is in some way seeking to make room for the concept of church outside parochial structures, it can become a ‘catch-all’ term for any non-parish based initiative. As a result, many of the distinctive features associated with emerging church are lost. Still, the working group identified a number of features that were common in these entities, and have meaningful overlap with emerging churches. These features include the appropriation of small groups for relational development, the forsaking of a Sunday morning gathering, the employment of networks to connect people and a post-denominational makeup of the congregation.³⁰⁹

As indicated earlier, *Novitas* is a *Fresh Expressions* initiative, and of the various types of fresh expressions of church identified by the *Mission-Shaped Church* report, ‘Alternative Worship’ represents the strongest stream of influence within this

³⁰⁷ Mission Council, *Mission-Shaped Church*, p. xi.

³⁰⁸ Mission Council, *Mission-Shaped Church*, p. 44.

³⁰⁹ Mission Council, *Mission-Shaped Church*, p. 43.

emerging community.³¹⁰ In the following chapter, I illustrate the influence that alternative worship had on *Novitas* through the profile of Dave—one of the founding participants in the *Novitas* community.³¹¹ In the remainder of this section I further highlight the relationship between alternative worship groups and emerging church in the U.K. Many of the features explored here will resurface in the description of the *Novitas* community in the following chapter—linking that emerging church community with the wider emerging church phenomenon.

According to Baker, Gay, and Brown, alternative worship is a moniker that signifies a collection of innovative and experimental forms of worship that seek to engage church with contemporary culture in a contextual manner.³¹² Steve Taylor’s research on alternative worship argues that these communities ‘seemed to explore more participatory, creative and culturally connected approaches to faith and worship’.³¹³ He continues:

The aim was said to be a form of worship and church fully authentic to what the participants were as people and fully reflective of the postmodern culture in which participants lived their everyday lives. Such a definition is thus a claim for the enculturation and embodiment of Christian faith, with specific reference to a popular postmodern cultural context.³¹⁴

Notoriously difficult to locate due to their postmodern suspicion of labels and categorization,³¹⁵ these alternative worship communities share a high degree of affinity with emerging church phenomena. For instance, the features of alternative worship groups listed below were highlighted in the Mission-Shaped Church and

³¹⁰ A secondary stream of influence is café church. While the leaders and participants of *Novitas* do not consciously draw upon any café church literature or point to any prototype community as influential, there are still a number of café church features present (e.g., gathering around small tables, having drinks and ‘nibbles’ available at the start, allowing people sit and talk as opposed to standing while speaking, and the emphasis on interacting rather than being a spectator). Mission Council, *Mission-Shaped Church*, p. 50.

³¹¹ See: chapter four, pages 138-140.

³¹² See Baker, Gay, and Brown, *Alternative Worship*, p. vii.

³¹³ Taylor, “New Way of Being Church: Approach to Cityside Baptist Church as Christian Faith ‘Making Do’ in a Postmodern World” (PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2004), p. 350.

³¹⁴ Taylor, “New Way of Being Church,” p. 350.

³¹⁵ Mission Council, *Mission-Shaped Church*, p. 44.

could equally serve as key descriptors for both *Novitas* and other emerging churches in the U.K.

- They are significantly populated by people departing from existing church.
- They express a strong desire to be different.
- They are among the most vocal in their repudiation of existing church.
- They have, thus far, not demonstrated long-term stability.
- They are quite clearly not an evangelistic attempt at being culturally relevant.
- They are not some form of ‘seeker service’ for the artistic.
- They are not an attempt to re-socialize people back into ‘real’ church.
- These groups have a remarkably strong sense of community.³¹⁶

Other researchers of emerging communities in the U.K. have also highlighted the similarities between emerging church and alternative worship groups. Although John Hall sees alternative worship as a fad, he posits that it was a precursor to ‘youth church’, which later took on the label ‘emerging church’.³¹⁷ He argues that ‘the alternative worship constituency was not very large but it was one more reaction to the failure of the Church to come to terms with the changes in secular culture and an expression of the personal disillusionment of the leaders in the movement.’³¹⁸ This reaction to the perceived failures of the church is also present in emerging communities such as *Novitas*.³¹⁹ Janine Paden Morgan sees overlap between alternative worship and emerging church as well, arguing that ‘clearly, the values of [alternative worship] are shared by and have shaped emerging churches in the U.K., so much so that it is difficult at times to distinguish the two.’³²⁰ According to Morgan, the main distinction lies in the fact that alternative worship groups tend to

³¹⁶ Mission Council, *Mission-Shaped Church*, pp. 45-46.

³¹⁷ Hall writes: ‘When I began this study people spoke of youth churches. During the period of study the terminology changed to “niche church” and, at the time of writing, the description growing in popularity was that of “emerging church”.’ John Hall, “The Rise of the Youth Congregation and Its Missological Significance” (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2003), p. 391.

³¹⁸ Hall, “Youth Congregation,” p. 203.

³¹⁹ See: ‘Patterns of Emergence’ section in chapter four.

³²⁰ Janine Paden Morgan, “Emerging Eucharist: Formative Ritualizing in British Emerging Churches” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2009), p. 44.

be event-centred in nature, whereas emerging churches tend to be centred on the on-going life of the community. In the following chapter, I develop a description of the *Novitas* community that not only demonstrates the significant overlap between alternative worship groups and emerging church, but also demonstrates these distinctions that Morgan references—focusing particularly on the communal life of this emerging church.

Common Table

Because the origin and development of the *Common Table* community bore a striking resemblance to the above history and development of the North American emerging church phenomenon, a close consideration of the corollary relationship between the two will serve as a helpful mechanism for ecclesiastically situating the *Common Table* congregation.

Even though the initial gatherings of the *Common Table* community did not commence until 2005, the ecclesial networks that helped give shape and support to this new emerging church materialized in the United States in the mid 1990s. As indicated in the above section on the structural development of emerging church, a small number of Christian leaders from across the country, most of whom were under the age of thirty, began interacting with one another through a sequence of conferences and gatherings sponsored by *The Leadership Network*. Although initially linked with one another through the efforts of the *Leadership Network*, these younger pioneers continued to coalesce around a number of different organizational entities throughout the late 1990s, with a core group of participants first morphing from the *Young Leaders Network* to form the *Terra Nova Project*, and then eventually coming together to birth the *Emergent Village*.

Crucially, during these seminal years of the *Emergent Village*, Mike—a leading participant in the founding of the *Common Table* community who at the time was a pastor for youth at *Shelbyville Community Church*—experienced a significant level of involvement with this network. In chapter five I further develop Mike’s early involvement in this network and the impact it had on the formation of *Common*

Table.³²¹ Presently, the connections Mike and *Common Table* maintain with *Emergent Village* ‘are pretty informal and through friendships’.³²² Nevertheless, Mike revealed that he did see a continuing impact from *Emergent Village* on his community, acknowledging that ‘the emergent movement is big enough that we have somebody at least once every three months sort of come [to *Common Table*] because they're looking for an emergent church in Springfield’.³²³

Yet beyond *Common Table*’s early and on-going connection with *Emergent Village*, there are other relevant parallels between this community and the wider emerging church phenomenon. As the section outlining the narratives of community participants in chapter five shows, those taking part in *Common Table* shared a common ecclesiastical heritage—which links them to the account of the wider emerging church.³²⁴ As the above narrative indicates, those participating in emerging church characteristically come from conservative, evangelical, and charismatic churches.³²⁵ In harmony with these evaluations, a majority of participants and leaders in the *Common Table* community clearly located their ecclesiastical heritage in the above traditions—even if they found themselves reacting strongly against them at times. While I explore this in more detail in chapter five, Joe, a *Common Table* participant, summarized the nature of this common heritage well. When I asked him if he considered *Common Table* to be within the evangelical stream of the wider church, Joe laughingly responded, ‘I think if I didn't it would be somewhat denial—I mean, I think a lot of our community has come from that stream.’³²⁶ He continued his observation by saying, ‘I think that the way that we

³²¹ See: chapter five, pages 179-180.

³²² Mike, interview by author, Springfield, 16 July 2009, Mike transcript, turn 42.

³²³ Mike, turn 42.

³²⁴ See: chapter five, pages 220-237.

³²⁵ See Also: Drane, “Emerging Church,” p. 4; and Eddie Gibbs, “Church Responses to Culture Since 1985,” *Missiology: An International Review* 35, no. 2 (April 2007): p. 166.

³²⁶ Joe, interview by author, Springfield, 13 July 2009, Joe transcript, turn 36.

talk about the commitment to the faith can only be something that would be defined as somewhat evangelical.³²⁷

Yet, despite this evangelical heritage—or indeed as a result of this evangelical heritage—participants in *Common Table* often exhibited a high degree of pessimism when it came to evaluating certain elements within these wings of the church. Those penetrating evaluations are also explored in chapter five, and serve as a crucial attribute in further allying this community with the wider North American emerging church phenomenon—namely, the ‘post-evangelical’ accent that Bayder-Saye recognized within the non-denominational ranks of emerging churches. Furthermore, just as many of the early emerging churches in the U.S. arose out of a clear dissatisfaction with mega-churches that populated the North American ecclesial landscape, so too did the *Common Table* community. Again, this dissatisfaction is illustrated in the section outlining the narratives of *Common Table* participants in chapter five.³²⁸ While emerging church remains a diverse collection of individuals and ecclesial entities, the qualities described above help situate both the *Novitas* and the *Common Table* communities within the wider emerging phenomenon. I now turn my attention to the task of developing a thicker description of each of these emerging churches.

³²⁷ Joe, turn 36. In the interview, Joe qualified his understanding of what he meant by ‘evangelical’, by distancing himself from descriptions that would link this term with ‘being born again’ and focusing more upon the afterlife. Instead, he said that he and the participants of *Common Table* ‘would understand ourselves, in reclaiming the word “evangelical”, to be those who are committed to their faith, to think that it is vital for life in the community of God, and vital to the world, vital to the future of the world—the future of the real material world as well.’

³²⁸ See: chapter five, pages 220-237.

Chapter 4: Depiction of *Novitas*

In this chapter I offer a thorough depiction of the *Novitas* community by describing this emerging church's ecclesial contexts and historical development, its weekly patterns, its physical and online spaces, its worship gatherings, the profiles and personal narratives of its participants, and the community's core practices. Although this portrayal is based largely upon my fieldwork data—unfolding in thick detail the numerous community attributes that I observed as a participant, and the various perspectives of group members that were generated through interview encounters—portions of the material also rely upon *Novitas*' own self-description as found within a mixture of published sources and websites.

Overview of the Novitas Community

This portion of the chapter constitutes a narration through the formation and development of *Novitas*, as well as an introduction to particular individuals who have aligned themselves with this emerging community. The below portion also describes in detail the shared spaces and collective practices of this church. Since the particulars relating to the early life and growth of this emerging church lie distantly beyond my own empirical research into this community, I will, out of necessity, be deeply reliant upon published accounts of *Novitas*' story and interview material from founding members. Conversely, when describing the weekly rhythms, the shared practices and the physical spaces of this community, I primarily draw upon my own field notes and research reports.

The Ecclesial Context of *Novitas* – History and Development

Following a review by the *Church of England's* Wellingham archdeacon, which identified a need for more innovative models of worship relevant to younger, city centre dwellers, Dave, an evangelist with the *Church Army* was commissioned in 2001 to serve as a *City Centre Missioner*, with the aim of pioneering new forms of church in this urban context. The community formed from this joint effort between the *Church Army* and the diocese of Wellingham was *Novitas*. According to Dave, establishing and leading this community:

was the job which I was given when I moved to Wellingham. So I was employed eight years ago to explore new ways of being church in

the city centre... So yeah, it was what I was employed to do and as *Novitas* has evolved, I've been the figure head throughout the years.³²⁹

Significantly, the *Mission-Shaped Church* report concluded that the single most influential factor in determining the emergence and development of various fresh expressions of church was the element of leadership.³³⁰ Indeed, many of the fresh expression initiatives observed by this working group resulted primarily from the pioneering efforts of a single individual. The origin of *Novitas* attests to the veracity of this finding, as Dave's role in the formation of this community was decisive.

When Dave arrived in Wellingham, he became reacquainted with a young couple he had met only once before. Prior to Dave's arrival, this couple (Barbara and her partner) had been gathering around a dining room table in their city centre flat, asking, 'What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to try to follow Christ in this culture... now—who we are, where we are?'³³¹ Dave and his partner joined in those conversations around the dining room table, and the discussions continued to 'grow and progress' through the autumn of 2001 as the two couples met weekly on Wednesday evenings.³³² Through gradually inviting new people to join in these ecclesiological conversations, *Novitas* was born—and Wednesday nights would persist as the primary time during the week that this emerging community would meet.³³³

In early 2002, *Novitas* began meeting for public worship, with their initial gathering being held on a Sunday evening in the Wellingham Cathedral. Designed to forge a sacred space in the centre of Wellingham for young city centre dwellers, this experimental service was well received and resulted in the development of a monthly worship gathering on Sunday nights. A core group of twenty to twenty-five

³²⁹ Dave, interview by author, Wellingham, 2 April 2009, Dave transcript, turns 10, 12.

³³⁰ Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), p. 132.

³³¹ Barbara, interview by author, Wellingham, 18 March 2009, Barbara transcript, turn 35.

³³² Barbara, turn 37.

³³³ There were also contextual reasons for establishing Wednesday night as the time for the primary weekly meeting. See the below section *Initial Overview of the Weekly Rhythms of the Community*.

participants also emerged through this worship gathering, and they continued to meet on a weekly basis on Wednesday evenings for both worship and discussion. Over the next several years, this core group would gradually grow, with gatherings being held in a city centre parish church. Following a worship service that *Novitas* led for the participants at *Greenbelt* in 2003, accounts about this emerging church began to spread, and the community witnessed a marked increase in involvement, reaching approximately sixty core participants by that autumn. During these early years, the *Novitas* community sought to engage with the city centre art culture through various events such as a monthly film night—where, following a screening, the spiritual dimensions of a film would be discussed. The *Novitas* community was also involved with Wellingham’s *Mind, Body, Spirit Fair*, offering to pray for the fair’s participants. The core make-up of the community did not always remain consistent during this time, and would fluctuate between a nucleus of twenty individuals and a nucleus of fifty individuals.

A key shift in the life of the *Novitas* community began in 2004, when Ethan, a Methodist circuit minister, was sent to Wellingham by the *Methodist Church of Great Britain*. Arriving with ‘a completely blank sheet of paper’, one of the first things that Ethan did was ‘to see what was already going on in the city centre’.³³⁴ Finding *Novitas* to be ‘one of those things [going on in the city centre]’, Ethan ‘became immediately a part of the community’, with the original thought that *Novitas* would be a place where he could ‘hang out’, and it could be his community while he attempted to ‘carry on with stuff’.³³⁵ After a few weeks however, Ethan realized that the Christian community he sought to develop in Wellingham would have been very similar to *Novitas* and thus approached Dave about an ecumenical partnership. Given the covenant relationship that the *Church of England* and the *Methodist Church of Great Britain* entered into in 2003, Ethan saw the importance of this partnership with *Novitas*, and looked forward to ‘being able to work as a team to be able to achieve more’.³³⁶ Dave agreed with this sentiment and invited Ethan to join a leadership team made up of *Novitas* participants, which had been established

³³⁴ Ethan, interview by author, Wellingham, 18 March 2009, Ethan transcript, turn 20.

³³⁵ Ethan, turn 20.

³³⁶ Ethan, turn 22.

to help guide the community. According to Ethan, the key impact of this partnership was the development of the *Fulcrum Café*.

Housed in the basement of the *Methodist Central Hall* (located in the city centre of Wellingham), the *Fulcrum Café* began as a night café. Operating from late Saturday night through early Sunday Morning, this night café was designed to be a safe place for city centre club-goers to land after a Saturday night out. The *Novitas* participants initially led this café, and its activities included DJs, live music, and film showings. According to Ethan, the engagement with the night café encouraged *Novitas* participants to ‘refocus and rethink their role’ in the city centre, and as they considered ‘what it was for them to be church’, their involvement in the *Fulcrum Café* sharpened the ‘missional dimension’ of this emerging community.³³⁷ However, in the years between the establishment of the night café and my own involvement with the *Novitas* community, a number of key developments took place that notably shaped the relationship between the café and this emerging church.

First, as the night café became more established in the city centre, the majority of volunteers who oversaw its operations shifted from those who belonged to the *Novitas* community to those who belonged to the wider, city centre arts community. Second, as more people became involved in the night café that operated in the basement of the *Methodist Central Hall*, the overall activities surrounding this space grew, and *Fulcrum* developed into a fully functioning city centre café—with daily hours of operation, a sizeable food and drink menu, and paid staff. While still led by Ethan, the *Fulcrum Café* also began hosting its own film discussions, art exhibitions, game nights and other community service activities. As a result of this, two very distinct communities began forming around *Novitas* and the *Fulcrum Café*, each with a different ethos, set of values, and relationship to the Church. The tensions surrounding this dynamic created fertile soil for fruitful inquiry into the *Novitas* community and it remained a crucial component in my field note entries, interview questions and focus group presentation. A third development—taking place within the *Novitas* community—was the migration of the weekly worship gathering from

³³⁷ Ethan, turn 22.

the city centre parish church to the *Fulcrum Café*. This migration occurred in several stages. First, when the core participants of the *Novitas* community began experimenting with smaller meetings—breaking into three smaller groups that met on Wednesday nights—one of those groups, led by Ethan, chose to gather in the *Fulcrum Café* space. Then, as the *Novitas* community chose to re-gather into a single group, those participating in the two groups that met in the nearby city centre parish church, relocated to the café space, and *Fulcrum* has served as the home of the *Novitas* weekly gatherings ever since.

Significantly, the two distinct communities that formed around *Novitas* and the *Fulcrum Café* did maintain a degree of association with one another. However, this connection was primarily facilitated through Dave and Ethan’s mutual involvement in the different communities. Even though Dave focused his efforts on leading the *Novitas* community, he would routinely involve himself in café specific activities. For instance, during my participation with *Novitas*, Dave coordinated the rotating art installations for the *Fulcrum Café*. Likewise, while Ethan focused most of his attention on the café operations, he was also noticeably involved in the weekly worship gatherings of the *Novitas* community. Yet, beyond the involvement of these two, there was no sustained overlap between the communities during my participation.

Not only did Dave and Ethan serve as the primary point of connection between the *Novitas* community and the *Fulcrum Café*, they also provided the primary link between this emerging church and the churches sponsoring them—namely the *Church of England* and the *Methodist Church of Great Britain*. As an ordained minister in the *Methodist Church*, Ethan saw himself as being accountable to this denomination.³³⁸ Dave, a candidate for ordained ministry in the *Church of England*, had similar accountabilities to his denominations. Indeed, when asked in an interview about the relationship that this emerging community has with the wider church, Ethan highlighted these very connections. He remarked, ‘I think inevitably

³³⁸ He also had responsibilities as Methodist minister to attend circuit meetings, and this brought him into regular contact and dialogue with his colleagues who were ‘all coming from the traditional perspective’. Ethan, turn 36.

because Dave is part of the Anglican Church and I'm part of the Methodist Church, that what I do, I'm under the discipline of the Methodist Church'.³³⁹ Expounding upon this relationship, Ethan continued, 'I think we want to be true to the roots of that and respect that and be grateful—recognizing that actually we are only here because of them, and they fund us, and *Novitas* isn't independent from that'. The relationship between *Novitas* and the sponsoring churches goes beyond funding however, and accountability structures have been put in place through the establishment of a steering group. Dave described the nature of this steering group, reporting that:

For the past seven years we've had a steering group, which has had changing membership. At the moment, it's current incarnation has someone from the Anglican Diocese, someone from the Methodist Church, someone from Liverpool [who] is a part of an emerging church service, an ordained person there, [and] someone from the *Methodist Central Hall*. I think that's it at the moment.³⁴⁰

Noting that he, Ethan, and a *Novitas* participant were also a part of this steering group, Dave said that it served as 'a place of accountability' and 'a place for us to ask questions'.³⁴¹

In addition to funding and accountability, *Novitas* also inherited certain ecclesial practices from their sponsoring churches. For instance, due to their relationship to the *Methodist Church* and the *Church of England*, the Anglican and Methodist traditions heavily influenced the assumptions about Christian baptism in this community. Thus, although there were reports of debates that took place concerning the nature and place of this practice in *Novitas*, when actual baptisms did occur, they were carried out within the framework established by the sponsoring churches.³⁴² Dave remarked that, 'for us, [baptism] was a formal entrance into the sponsoring churches—so the Anglican Church and the Methodist Church', and thus, 'the person wasn't baptised, you know, into *Novitas*, they were baptized into God's church'.³⁴³

³³⁹ Ethan, turn 58.

³⁴⁰ Dave, turn 56.

³⁴¹ Dave, turn 56.

³⁴² For an example of the debate surrounding baptism in the *Novitas* community, see the below section on space for theological exploration and discussion.

³⁴³ Dave, turn 30.

Although the community of *Novitas* has maintained a degree of fluidity in their structure and participation since 2001, the current manifestation of this emerging church showed certain signs of stability during my participation—with the community being comprised of approximately fifty individuals who were predominately between the ages of twenty and thirty-five.³⁴⁴ These individuals live scattered throughout the city of Wellingham and in surrounding communities. Yet, during my participation with this emerging church, an announcement occurred that signalled a future change was in store for this community. Both Dave and Ethan made known to the community their plans to leave *Novitas* later in the year, as both would be transitioning to different posts within their respective denominations. Even though the more tangible ramifications of their exits were not observable during my participation—since both Ethan and Dave remained with the communities during the entire time I was there—one crucial aspect of the proposed transition warrants mention. Both the *Novitas* community and the *Fulcrum Café*, along with the churches sponsoring them, decided that jointly hiring a single individual to lead both the café and the emerging community was preferable to hiring two separate individuals—one to replace Dave and one to replace Ethan. This decision was based, in part, on the recognition of the discontinuity existing between the *Fulcrum Café* and the *Novitas* community. Thus, the two communities sought to hire one individual—a Methodist or Anglican minister—who would help facilitate the coming together of these two groups.

The Principal Patterns of the *Novitas* Community

As demonstrated through the above description, the community of *Novitas* has experienced a significant amount of variability in their structures and participation since they began in 2001. In 2009, I began participating in this emerging church, and this section of the chapter offers an overview of the activities that took place during my time with *Novitas*.

³⁴⁴ These details are approximated based upon my observations as a participant. Since no demographic survey was conducted, I relied upon impressions formed early in my research and then corroborated these impressions through a more intentional investigation. The age range of those involved corresponds with other research on emerging church and alternative worship groups in the United Kingdom. See Paul Roberts, *Alternative Worship in the Church of England*, Grove Worship Series, vol. W 155 (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 1999), p. 3.

Initial Overview of the Weekly Rhythms of the Community

At the centre of *Novitas*' congregational life was the weekly gathering, and unlike the practice of many existing churches, the weekly gathering for this community was on Wednesday evenings. This modification resulted primarily from the contextualization process that occurred at the origins of *Novitas*. Because of the transient quality of city centre dwellers, where weekends are often reserved for travel and leisure, the architects of *Novitas* decided that a mid-week gathering would more suitably accommodate. Although these weekly gatherings followed a four-week cycle in which the participants engaged in distinct activities on different Wednesday nights, there was a general motif and pattern to these times that clearly surfaced during my participation with the community. To be specific, Wednesday evenings at *Novitas* more often resembled a religious education course or a postgraduate discussion group than a worship gathering, with the primary elements of the night routinely being learning and dialogue. While creative and experimental components—such as recitations of *The Jesus Prayer*, painting, ambient music, releasing sky lanterns, humorous or provocative video excerpts and contemplative walking through the city streets—permeated the liturgical portions of this gathering, they were inevitably accompanied by substantial measures of discussion. This discussion would be generously peppered throughout the programmed portion of the evening, giving those taking part in the rituals the opportunity to explore and question what they were engaging, and these discussions would often continue at the local pub the community participants went to following their formal time together. In addition to the weekly gathering on Wednesday night, there was a small band of *Novitas* participants—typically between four and ten individuals—who gathered on Sunday evenings in a local parish church for a quiet prayer and meditation service, and once a month a group from *Novitas* conducted a multi-generational service for participants with children.

Many of the community's activities and initiatives took place in the city centre at the *Fulcrum Café*—which, as noted above, was located in a converted space in the basement of the Wellingham Methodist Central Hall. Although led by a combination of volunteers and staff, paid employees oversaw the majority of the work. The café served the purpose of being both a place for the *Novitas* community to gather for their weekly meetings, as well as a place to focus their mission into the

city through art exhibitions and other community service activities such as the *Night Café*. Beyond the sanctioned meetings described above, there were a number of informal social gatherings that took place throughout the week. These would range from meeting to view a film at the cinema to a night out at a karaoke bar. Much of this was facilitated through spontaneous announcements at a formal gathering or through an email listserv to which the community participants subscribe.

Physical Space of *Novitas*

Before turning to a description of the physical spaces of the *Novitas* community, an introduction to the significance of ecclesiastical space in general—as well as an introduction to the contours of various venues chosen by emerging churches—is necessary for providing a helpful context for interpreting what follows. While this thesis does not take up the use of physical space in these communities as its chief theme, neither does it neglect critical investigations into the use of physical space, pretending as though such inquiries possess little significance in the understanding and interpretation of churches. As Jeanne Halgren Kilde suggests, ‘the material world is far from neutral’ and material objects and physical spaces can articulate and maintain a great deal of ecclesiastical meaning.³⁴⁵ In interpreting the significance of ecclesiastical space, I affirm her assertion that worship spaces go far beyond simply providing a setting in which rituals and liturgies are enacted, and actually significantly contribute to the meaning of the rites themselves—shaping the community’s practices by ‘facilitating some activities and impeding others’.³⁴⁶ Beyond these promoting and limiting influences of physical and material arrangements, there exists a wide number of ways to understand and interpret the use of ecclesiastical spaces. Other examples from Kilde’s work include: (1) focusing the attention of participants on the divine, (2) mediating relationships between the community members and God, (3) demarcating the community and designating hierarchy, (4) teaching both insiders and outsiders about Christianity, and (5) communicating certain messages about the community worshiping in the building to the community at large.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁵ Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *Sacred Power Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 199. In this particular quote, Kilde is specifically addressing the power relationships that exist within churches.

³⁴⁶ Kilde, *Sacred Power Sacred Space*, p. 3.

³⁴⁷ See: Kilde, *Sacred Power Sacred Space*.

In order to better comprehend the implications of the use of space in emerging church, the research conducted by Karen Wiseman on this topic provides insightful analysis into the overall approach these communities take in arranging their physical spaces. Her findings—based upon survey questionnaires and direct observation—suggest that emerging churches seek to create worship spaces that can be used as ‘a blank canvas for décor, for art, for aesthetic and technological imaging’, providing ‘opportunities for diverse worship arrangements’ and the ‘possibility of a transcendent experience through art and imagery’.³⁴⁸ While I do not make explicit connections back to Wiseman’s research in the following description, clear overlap exists between her general assessments concerning worship space in emerging churches and the rich depictions of the gathering spaces of not only the *Novitas* community, but also the *Common Table* community. I now turn to the first of these rich descriptions, outlining the physical space of the *Novitas* community.

Located within the boundary of the arts and culture district in Wellingham, *Fulcrum Café* serves as both the home of the *Novitas* community and as the focal point for the performance of their on-going missional activity in the city centre. Although the community utilises several basement rooms in the *Methodist Central Hall* to create this space, the street-facing entrance to *Fulcrum Café* is situated alongside other retail and service shops around the corner from the entrance into the Methodist building—effectively allowing it to appear as an independent art café. Indeed, many of the casual patrons remain unaware of the connection *Fulcrum* has to *Novitas* or to the *Methodist Church*, and from the street, the café’s large glass window displaying an interior art exhibition space and its grey painted exterior with white lettered signage, give no indication that this venue has ecclesiastical purposes. On a Wednesday night, a small A-framed sign sits on the sidewalk, alerting those passing by to the fact that the *Novitas* community gathers at this location. During the remainder of the week, a similar sign is used to notify café customers of the various specials or events that are on offer for that day.

³⁴⁸ Karyn L. Wiseman, “Grace Space: the Creation of Worship Space for the Postmodern / Emerging Church” (PhD diss., Drew University, May 2006), p. 216.

Access to the café from the street is gained through a thick metal and glass door situated next to the storefront display window. Immediately on the other side of this door, a flight of stairs descends down a narrow corridor, elbowing first to the right and then to the left, ending at the basement level of the café. The white walls of this staircase corridor are lined with posters and flyers advertising various independent musical and theatrical performances taking place within the city. This serves to immediately—and credibly—link the culture and activities of the *Fulcrum Café* with the wider arts community that exists within this district. The sparsely furnished entrance hall at the foot of the stairs is also white in colour and its walls play host to an arrangement of original pieces of local artwork created by those participating in the rotating exhibitions that the café hosts. Several doors leading to the toilets and the denominational offices upstairs also dot the walls of this entrance hall, and beyond the double doors situated at the far corner of the room lies the primary café facilities and meeting space for the *Novitas* community.

As is the case with a number of larger spaces, the basic form of this main area is slightly rectangular, with the length of the room only moderately exceeding the width. Nevertheless, the creation of various structures such as a stage, an elevated seating area, and a service bar with a dropped ceiling overhead serve to obfuscate this square form—giving the overall café space a more multi-layered appearance, offering a mixture of depth and dimension. Although the walls themselves are white, the rich purple panels above the bar, the rainbow mix of eclectic furniture, the green-carpeted stage, the golden yellow support poles rising from floor to ceiling, and the café's decorations, chalkboard menus and rotating art displays infuses the space with vivid colours. A smaller, red painted room—housing couches, chairs, and shelves stocked with novels and board games—sits to the side of the central space, and its colour also bleeds into the main area through a couple of sizeable passageways that allow access between the two rooms. During the day, natural light flows into the café space through a series of windows located on the exterior wall, supplementing the artificial illumination generated through an overhead stage lighting system. This lighting system allows for more diversity in ambience during night hours, as the light may be coloured, focused or dimmed to suit the requirements of the gathering.

Existing as a multipurpose facility, which transitions from a fully functioning café during the day to a worship venue at night (reverting back to a café before opening the next morning), the physical arrangements of *Fulcrum* only vary slightly from café use to *Novitas* use. On a typical day, café patrons can be found scattered around the downstairs rooms, either sitting at small cloth covered tables enjoying a light meal, nestled into thick cushioned couches surfing the internet on their laptops or relaxing in oversized chairs absorbed in a conversation while sipping a cup of coffee. Modern folk and ‘downtempo’ music fill the space with a soft sound that can be heard just below the quiet rumbling of voices and the clanging of dishware. The café staff work diligently taking orders from the bar, serving plates of food and bussing recently emptied tables—giving a lively atmosphere to this well-functioning café.

On Wednesday nights, a large video screen angling away from the exterior wall drops from the ceiling, signalling the transition of this space from a service venue to a worship venue. Other than the screen, little else changes in the arrangement of the room as *Novitas* participants situate themselves around various parts of the café, drinking coffee and—on one night a month—eating dinner together. At times, this positioning can serve to decentre the worship encounter, as the room arrangement has not created a point of focus for the community, allowing for contribution to the gathering to arise from any place in the venue. On many nights, a mixture of directed activities and guided conversations take place throughout the café space, also serving to breakdown notions of *front*, *back* or *centre*. Nevertheless, the persistent presence of the screen, along with the community’s extensive reliance upon video projection throughout the enactment of their liturgies, oftentimes results in this element becoming the de facto focal point in their gathering.

Online Space of *Novitas*

The *Novitas* community’s website served as their online home, and provided a medium for this emerging church to describe themselves and to make known their values—through both word and image. Set against a white backdrop, the homepage of the website was subdued and uncluttered, offering a minimalist presentation. The top of the homepage provided hypertext links to the other pages on the site. These included pages that alerted visitors to who the community was, what the community valued, where the community met, details on the weekly gatherings and the multi-

generational services, information about the *Fulcrum Café*, and a blog for community participants to interact with one another. A panoramic photograph of the city of Wellingham rested just below these hypertext links, and down the left side of the page was an image of a mural also referencing the city of Wellingham. This photograph of the Wellingham city would remain the consistent header across the various pages within the website. The homepage text rested below the photograph of Wellingham, and provided a brief description of the *Novitas* community—noting that they are a community of people who gather together to discover more about Christ, culture, and community. This description also revealed that *Novitas* sought to push at the boundaries, exploring God and spirituality in the city, in contemporary film, and in one another. The closing sentence of the homepage alerted site visitors to the fact that *Novitas* was supported by the Anglican and Methodist Churches in Wellingham as part of the *Fresh Expressions* initiative.

The content of the additional pages on the website was primarily informational in nature and remained static during my participation, with the one exception being the weblog—which was slightly more interactive, and moderated by blend of community participants and leaders. This blog page provided participants a more fluid space to post thoughts on themes not arising in the formal gatherings; to inform others about what had recently taken place in the community; and to make announcements about upcoming gatherings, events or community needs. Examples of the topics introduced through this medium included a short reflection on the nature of ‘community’, a post on gender stereotypes and the role of women within emerging churches, a presentation of lyrics from a recently released musical album from the rock group U2 (*No Line on the Horizon*, 2009), and commentary on news article concerning counter-terrorism and the right to take photography in public spaces. The announcements made through this blog space ranged from upcoming seminars and conferences on emerging church, to the various art exhibitions taking place in the *Fulcrum Café*. The job announcement for a new community leader was also posted to this blog. Finally, community participants would use this blog space to occasionally post photographs and brief summaries of particular worship activities or art exhibitions that had recently taken place at *Novitas*. Although the blog provided a space for comment, participants rarely used this feature and thus conversations around the initial posts never developed.

As for the other pages on the *Novitas* website, two were particularly helpful in understanding this emerging church. One was entitled ‘who we are’, and contained two photographs of the community worshipping, and several paragraphs describing this community—indicating that *Novitas* is an emerging church in the city of Wellingham, engaged in a journey of creative exploration into faith, worship, and culture. One photograph was set in the outdoors and depicted participants gathering around a young woman who held a large candle. The other photograph showed the worshipers in a candlelit space, receiving communion while indecipherable images and words were projected on the walls behind them. The rest of the text on this page highlighted the community’s commitment to the city centre, and their inclusive nature—positing that they welcomed a dialogue between different theological positions. The text also advised visitors that this community considered God to already be working in the world, and that God’s presence could be found in music, film, arts, and other areas of contemporary culture. Stressing how the *Novitas* community sought to affirm and enjoy the parts of culture that give voice to God, the closing paragraphs on this webpage revealed how this emerging church worshiped. Noting first the vital nature of experience, the text disclosed how the *Novitas* community aimed for holistic worship that allowed for freedom to explore new ways in which to contemplate God. In doing this, the text indicated that the community would draw upon the vast resources present in the Christian tradition.

The other page on the website that was particularly helpful in understanding this community was entitled ‘values’. With the exception of the panoramic photograph of the city of Wellingham that appeared at the top of each page, there were no photographs present on this particular page. Instead, the four words ‘rooted’, ‘missional’, ‘serving’ and ‘welcoming’ were creatively arranged in a blue and white word image. Naturally, these four words would also appear in the text of the page and served as the four expressed values of this community.³⁴⁹ The text on this page also posited that *Novitas* was a Christian community comprised of those who are either committed to, or are exploring a journey into, a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

³⁴⁹ More is said of these values in the below description of my first worship gathering with the *Novitas* community.

Description of the *Novitas* Worship Gathering

With the overview of the weekly rhythms and physical spaces of the *Novitas* community in place, I now turn my attention to a more detailed description of their weekly worship gatherings. Because these gatherings were comprised of diverse and varying liturgical elements, the content and format of the community's meetings would differ from week to week. In order to give an authentic and detailed sense of what this emerging church does in worship, I first sketch one of their Wednesday night gatherings—revealing the format of this particular evening, along with its constituent components.³⁵⁰ Following this description, I then discuss a variety of additional conversations and liturgical elements present in their Wednesday gatherings, and recount several of the activities that took place on these nights, offering them as illustrative examples of their worship and discussions.

Narration through Initial Worship Gathering

On the first Wednesday of the month, the *Novitas* community would gather for a shared meal as a part of their time together. Thus, when I joined the community for my first worship gathering on 7 January 2009, this communal meal comprised a considerable portion of the evening. Dave had informed me that *Novitas* participants begin gathering at the *Fulcrum Café* around 19:00, with the night's activities beginning at 19:45. Arriving at 19:15, I noticed the small A-framed sign that sits on the sidewalk outside the café, letting the inhabitants of the city centre know that the *Novitas* worship gathering was taking place this evening. Since signs such as these can be a common feature on city centre sidewalks, it tended to go unnoticed. In fact, on this night I stood and watched two women pass by, walking in-between the sign and the *Fulcrum Café* storefront, never even glancing towards the sign. The rotating art exhibit housed behind the café's large glass window was entitled 'Gift'. It was a mural of various sized pink and red wrapped presents, all hanging at different depths from the ceiling. Entering the café, I descended down the flight of stairs that elbowed to the right and then to the left taking me into the basement of the building and the heart of the *Fulcrum Café*.

³⁵⁰ For this initial sketch, I have selected to describe the first Wednesday night that I participated with the *Novitas* community. I chose to highlight this night because it represents an 'outsider's' initial perspective of this community and their worship.

Upon entering the main café space, I observed Dave at work, moving about the room, getting things ready for the evening. On other Wednesday nights, I would observe ambient music being played as I entered the café, but on this evening I did not observe any music in this space. A small number of *Novitas* participants were already there as well. Some were visiting with one another as they lounged on beanbags on the stage, while others sat at the table and chairs arranged throughout the café space. Behind the café bar was a man who appeared to be in his late twenties or early thirties. He engaged me, as well as others who entered the café space, with friendly conversation as he served coffee and tea. Dave then joined us at the bar, and after offering me a complimentary tea—something typically done for first time visitors to *Novitas*—he brought me over to a table occupied by several other *Novitas* participants, and introduced me to them. Eventually, thirty to forty participants would come and go throughout the evening, being scattered throughout the space at various tables, and even though a number of activities would transpire throughout the night, the conversations and discussions that occurred during the evening primarily took place between myself and the other members of this table.

A buffet dinner prepared by the *Fulcrum Café* was served, and the informal conversation around the table where I was seated ranged from an amusingly offbeat discussion about whether or not Christians could believe in aliens, to a more routine conversation concerning where we were from, what brought us to Wellingham, and what our current profession was. As dinner finished, the *Novitas* community moved into the more formal aspects of their gathering. As was the case for each Wednesday night, this more formal worship time was marked off by a candle lighting ceremony. Dave stood and requested the attention of the *Novitas* participants—who remained seated around the tables where they had just eaten dinner. At the centre of the café space, three candles had been placed on a small table, and after inviting the community participants to hold a brief half-minute of silence, Dave lit the candles using a modified Trinitarian formula. Avoiding the masculine designation of ‘Father’ for the first person of the trinity, Dave lit the initial candle in the name of God the Creator. The second was lit in the name of Jesus, God’s Son, and the third candle was then lit in the name of God’s Spirit. As he remained standing alongside the candles at the centre of the café space, Dave introduced the theme of this particular evening’s worship gathering—*Epiphany*. Reminding the participants of

the liturgical calendar and noting that this Christian holiday was being celebrated throughout the churches this week, Dave invited the *Novitas* community into an exploration of this celebration through the lens of various traditions.

My perception was that Dave's communication style combined warmth and confidence. He appeared to be at ease and comfortable in this setting and his presentation came across to me as being fresh and sincere. In explaining how *Epiphany*, in part, was a celebration of the visitation of the Magi, Dave invited Ethan to share this narrative from scripture. Standing as he spoke, Ethan read the gospel account from the book of Matthew (chapter two). This was followed by a reading from another member of the community, who, at the request of Dave, was asked to share a news article concerning Archbishop Rowan William's suggestion that the visit of the Magi was likely a legend. Interestingly, unlike Dave and Ethan, this member of the community—as well as all other members of the community who spoke that night—remained seated as he read. Importantly, this practice became a pattern during the worship gatherings of the community, as Dave and Ethan primarily stood when they spoke, while other participants remained seated when speaking.

The juxtaposition of these two readings invited further discussion, and we were prompted by Dave to have a broader conversation concerning sources of theological understanding. To help guide this conversation, Dave introduced the *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, requesting each table to discuss the relationship between scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Specifically, Dave asked us to consider how we might order or rank the importance of these various sources. The conversation at the table where I was seated quickly turned to a discussion about the implications of privileging one of these elements over the others. Given the evangelical backgrounds of the participants at my table, examples of privileging scripture over reason or experience were plentiful. For instance, participants at the table spoke of the way that scripture—when privileged—could be misused to justify hate and violence. Still, when discussing the appropriateness of reason, experience, or tradition as a primary source, the members of our table were equally unsatisfied, and so rejected the task of ordering these elements. When Dave drew the discussions to a close by asking for a couple of tables to share their conclusions with the larger

gathering, a female member of our table spoke about us being ‘all postmodern and non-linear’ and therefore we chose not to order or privilege one source over the others. Another table reported that they had come to the conclusion that experience trumped the other three—in that, experience was the lens through which scripture, tradition, and reason were interpreted. Following this discussion, dessert was offered, and in keeping with the theme of Epiphany, King Cakes were available. Dave introduced this menu item by describing how King Cakes were traditionally eaten in celebration of the Epiphany holiday in Portugal.

After dessert was finished, Dave called the community together for the concluding liturgical activities of the evening. Drawing the participants’ attention to a piece of chalk that he held in his hand, Dave described a Roman Catholic house-blessing ritual that traditionally occurred during the Epiphany holiday. Telling how a parish priest would bless a piece of chalk, and then that chalk would be used to write the date and the letters ‘CBM’ (for the Latin *Christus Bendicat Mansionem*) on the doors of the homes in the parish, the *Novitas* community enacted this ritual, praying a blessing for the café and writing the date and CMB above the doorway leading from the main space to the kitchen. As a part of this ceremony, chalk was also distributed to the participants, who were invited to take it home and carry out the ritual at their own place of residence. Alongside this house-blessing ritual, the *Novitas* community was also asked to enact a blessing over the city of Wellingham. Several sky lanterns were brought to the centre of the café space and participants were invited to take a marker and write a name of a particular place, person, group, or activity associated with the city on the lanterns’ paper shells. Using the imagery of the star that guided the Magi, Dave explained that these sky lanterns, when released, would represent the light of God, and thus we were asked to identify people or places in the city where we hoped to see God’s light shine this year. After completing the exercise of writing prayers on these sky lanterns, a few announcements were made concerning upcoming community gatherings, a hill walking expedition, and a gift exchange to recycle unwanted Christmas presents. The *Novitas* participants then gathered outside the *Fulcrum Café* on the streets of Wellingham—lighting and releasing the glowing lanterns into the city centre sky.

As was the community's tradition, following the formal worship gathering on Wednesday, *Novitas* participants would make their way to a nearby bar to spend more time with one another and continue the evening's conversations. On this Wednesday night, I journeyed over to the bar with approximately twenty other community participants. As we sat around various sized tables in a large corner section of the room, participants conversed about a range of subjects over a few drinks. During my time with the community I observed how the content of these conversations would range from the personal, as individuals talked about their own day to day affairs, to the theological, as community participants spoke to one another about God, church, and the spiritual life. On this particular night, the conversation around the table where I was seated remained focused on the personal lives of the participants as opposed to the evening's events at *Novitas*—with the exception of a short, humorous discussion that referenced the chalk blessing ceremony, where participants suggested various ways the acronym 'CBM' could be interpreted. As the night moved on, participants began to trickle out of the bar and make their way home. When I left the bar, there were only three to four participants remaining, and they too were gathering their belongings and planning to leave. As I reflected on the night, my perception was that the community had warmly received me. Although the participants I met that evening knew of my role as a researcher—since I attempted to disclose this piece of information early in conversations—this fact did not appear to overly influence the discussions. In fact, I was left with the impression that other first time participants would have received a similar welcome. Indeed, as was customary for the community, I was given a '*Novitas* Welcome Bag' on this night—which I explored after leaving the bar. It was small brown paper bag with corded paper handles. Taped over the top of the bag was a white sticker with the above quote written in blue. Inside the bag were several 3x5 glossy literature cards, a fair trade milk chocolate bar called *Divine*, three tea light candles, and a small wooden cross. There was nothing in the bag to indicate the significance of these latter items—although I presumed the tea light candles were meant to correspond with the candle lighting ceremony that took place at the beginning of the worship gathering. One of the literature cards, which featured a picture of a mural referencing the city of Wellingham, thanked the recipient for coming to *Novitas* and offered contact information for how to keep in touch with the community—noting that 'the best way to stay in touch is to come along each week'. Other literature cards had information about how to stay in touch with the pastoral team, which 'exists with *Novitas* to offer

payer and support for people’, as well as information about a monthly ‘intergenerational’ service held at a local parish church. A final literature card, which was entitled ‘*Novitas* Values’, was particularly illuminating. Identifying the four values of ‘Welcoming’, ‘Serving’, ‘Rooted’, and ‘Missional’, the card expounds upon how these values shape the *Novitas* community:

Welcoming: Christ meets every one of us and brings us near. In response to Christ’s welcome *Novitas* aims to be welcoming to all people. We therefore aim to reflect a diversity of theology and experience from all walks of life.

Serving: Our community is able to function and flourish by following the example of Jesus who served others. There are many ways in which the community is able to give and serve reflecting the diverse nature of our God-given talents.

Rooted: *Novitas* is a Christian community which interacts with the Bible as we recognise God’s unique presence within it. We draw from a rich vein of Christian tradition across denominations, including the Nicene Creed, as it informs our everyday lives and guides us into the future.

Missional: We believe that God is already active in our world, and we aim to join with God in God’s ongoing mission. This means we are engaged in the changes happening in Wellingham and the wider world. We believe that God has a vision to transform our city in ways that are just and which foster human flourishing.

While having these four values stated explicitly in this welcome bag gave helpful insight into the nature of this community, my continued participation with *Novitas* offered an opportunity for me to observe these values being embodied in the practices and self-descriptions of community participants. Through this embodiment, these values were confirmed, clarified, and, at times, challenged. I now continue my detailed depiction of the *Novitas* community by focusing on the variety of conversations that took place amongst community participants.

Community Conversations following Worship Gatherings

As noted in the above description of the first night I participated with *Novitas*, following the worship gatherings of the community on Wednesdays, it was customary for participants to go to a local bar in order to interact socially and engage in conversations prompted by the evening’s activities. Although the content of these conversations ranged from personal to theological, when they did turn to more

theological matters, *Novitas*—and the participant’s relationship to this community—occupied much of the discussion. Some of these conversations developed out of an observation or reflection on that night’s worship gathering, while other conversations developed around a more critical look at the nature and practices of this emerging community. An example of the former type of conversation occurred one evening when, following a *Novitas* worship gathering, a particular participant found himself troubled by one of the night’s readings. The worship gathering itself had been conducted in silence, with interactive stations set up throughout the café space. As participants moved through these stations, they engaged in various activities, such as silently reading a Psalm (Psalm 63) and then reflecting on it through painting, or silently reading an epistle (Philippians) and then writing their own letter to the *Novitas* community in response. At one of the stations, participants read a modern parable in which they were asked to imagine a world in which ‘following Christ’ had been declared illegal.³⁵¹ Participants were then told through the reading that they had been arrested on this charge, and the evidence against them would be presented. Although the prosecutors put forward a large amount of incriminating evidence—which included photographs documenting the participant’s worship attendance, and religious books confiscated from participant’s homes—ultimately, the judge presiding over the case declared that the participants would be found ‘not guilty’ on the charge of being a ‘Christ follower’. Explaining that the court was not interested in the activity of good ‘actors’ who spent their time developing their theology while merely thinking of a better world, the judge declared that the court’s main concern was convicting those who were actually involved in creating a better world by living as Christ and his followers did—giving one’s life for this cause, and challenging the world’s system. Since the worship gathering was conducted in silence, those participating in this activity did not have an opportunity to discuss their reflections on this particular piece. Thus, later that night at the bar, the discussion at one of the tables turned to that reading. It was introduced by an individual who commented that this piece troubled him—expressing doubt over whether or not he, in the scenario laid out in the reading, would have been convicted of being a Christ follower. Those gathered at the table sat in silent contemplation, until another community participant

³⁵¹ Although published after my participation with this emerging church, a version of this parable, entitled ‘No Conviction’, appeared in Peter Rollins, *The Orthodox Heretic: And Other Impossible Tales* (Brewster, Mass: Paraclete Press, 2009), pp. 3-6.

remarked that she too experienced anxiety when considering some of the more radical demands of Jesus' call—wishing that there were a way to reinterpret some of his harsh commands. While no direct action was taken in response to this reading, the participants agreed that it was important to allow certain demanding passages of scripture to 'haunt' or 'disturb' them, as opposed to dismissing or trivializing them.

While pub conversations such as the above flowed out of the night's worship gatherings, other conversations, which took a critical look at the nature and practice of this emerging church, also occurred regularly during this pub time. Participants debated about whether or not *Novitas* had lost its missional focus—as their community members were increasingly limited in their interactions with *Fulcrum Café* activities. A conversation in this vein took place between two community participants, focusing on the meaning of 'missional', and asking whether or not evangelism was a necessary component of a church's mission. In the midst of this conversation, one of the participants suggested to the other that the two of them would not be there, on that night, having that conversation, if someone earlier in their lives had not told them about Jesus. On other nights, the community members debated the egalitarian claims of the *Novitas* community, with one participant suggesting that the leadership of the community had become 'dictatorial' in their approach. A former member of the leadership team spoke about how she had been wearied by the experiences and expectations of leading. Calling it her 'wilderness experience', she mentioned how, in attempting to address this spiritual drought, it was necessary for her to step away from not only leadership, but also from the community itself. Sharing these kinds of details concerning one's own spiritual journey was certainly an aspect of this pub time, and on one evening, after several participants had recounted the naïve approach they once took towards scripture, one individual laughingly remarked that 'we've all had to go through our evangelical stage'.

Community Conversations During Worship Gatherings

Significantly, conversations such as the above were not limited to the bar meeting that followed the worship gatherings, but, as noted earlier, actually formed a noticeable dimension of the communities formal worship time. For example, one of the themes of a particular Wednesday night *Novitas* worship gathering was 'the

Bible’, and on this evening, community participants engaged in a combination of small and large group discussions surrounding this topic. Dave facilitated these discussions, using various prompts to guide the conversation. One such prompt was a video presentation delivered by A.J. Jacobs, the author of *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*.³⁵² As the title of the book suggests, Jacobs spent an entire year attempting to follow every command in the Bible as literally as possible. The short video the *Novitas* participants watched at their worship gathering, highlighted the challenges and insights generated through this experiment.³⁵³ At the conclusion of this piece, Jacobs advocated for a ‘cafeteria approach’ to scripture, where one could ‘pick and choose’ which parts of the bible to follow. He argued that the portions of scripture that called for tolerance, compassion, and loving one’s neighbour were to be obeyed, while the portions of scripture that were violent or intolerant in nature were to be opposed.

In the discussion that followed this video, the *Novitas* participants took various stances on Jacobs’ proposed cafeteria approach. One individual reported that she thought this method was indeed appropriate, and she offered a modified version of this approach—stating that a reading of scripture ought to focus on more significant matters, such as the bible’s commands to love, and should not be concerned with the less important matters in the text, such as the details surrounding the birth of Jesus. In response to this, another community participant cautioned against taking up a cafeteria approach—contending that this method seemed to be overly simplistic and arbitrary in nature. As the conversation surrounding the challenge of determining which portions of scripture to follow and which portions to discard continued, other participants suggested that the teachings of Jesus ought to be privileged over the teachings of Paul—believing Paul to be harsher in his teachings and more judgemental in his views. In response to this line of discussion, a particular community participant reminded the group about a worship gathering they had a year earlier, which focused on the sayings of Jesus. She suggested that many of the participants that night registered their surprise at the jarring nature of Jesus’

³⁵² A. J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

³⁵³ A. J. Jacobs, “A.J. Jacobs’ Year of Living Biblically,” *TED Partner Series* (Filmed Dec 2007): 17:36, Posted July 2008, http://www.ted.com/talks/a_j_jacobs_year_of_living_biblically.html.

teachings. As the discussion drew to a close, many community members found the notion of interpreting all of scripture through a hermeneutical lens of ‘love’ a helpful approach. In justifying this approach, one of the community participants quoted the concluding phrase of 1 Corinthians 13:13—‘the greatest of these is love’. Many of the other participants responded in a decidedly positive way to this quoted material. Given the community’s earlier criticisms of Paul and his writings, it was interesting that his work was now being privileged in such a fashion.

Other conversations and debates took place in their worship gatherings, and these ranged from small group discussions about responding to the current economic recession, to a large group discussion about the nature of the Eucharist. Newspaper clippings that had been distributed to each table prompted the small group discussion on the economic recession. Participants were asked to discuss an article from the newspaper that they found interesting, and then give an inspiring response through a scripture reading, poem, or song. A couple in the community—one emerging from a Protestant background, the other from a Catholic background—led the Eucharist discussion. Much of their input centred on their own wedding experience, where questions arose about how they might incorporate communion in such a way that was faithful to both traditions. The challenges that they were presented with prompted several debates amongst the *Novitas* participants about the nature of the Eucharist. Some participants maintained that a proper Eucharist celebration required specific elements to be used, in a specific liturgy, with an ordained clergy member presiding. Other participants suggested that communion was actually a community meal, and aspects such as the elements and the liturgy were negotiable. Still others discounted the significance of the Eucharist altogether, suggesting that it was not an imperative practice for the Christian community. Questions were also raised in the community about Christ’s presence in this ritual. One participant in particular used this discussion to launch into the larger question of the existence of God—claiming that he didn’t know ‘who, or what, or if anything was even up there’. As with most of the discussions that took place in the *Novitas* community, a consensus concerning the nature of the Eucharist was not reached, and the night ended with one participant bringing out a soft drink and a few biscuits and rhetorically asking whether or not this could be communion. Still, even though there were debates and conversations

around the nature of communion in this emerging church, whenever this ritual was practised, it was always an ordained minister presiding.

Liturgical and Visual Elements in Worship Gatherings

Not every aspect of this community's time together centred on conversation and discussion though. There were other elements present in their worship gatherings—elements that held cultural or liturgical significance. Examples of the former includes the opening segment from the film *Contact* (Zemeckis, 1997), which begins by showing a scene of the earth from orbit, and then slowly pulls back past the moon and past Mars to reveal the other planets in the solar system, other solar systems in the Milky Way galaxy, and then ultimately other galaxies in the universe. The scene ends when the quickly passing galaxies dissolve into pixels that then form the single eyeball of the film's main character. This visually stimulating piece served as a call to worship one evening—inviting participants to come, rest, and be engaged in what God was doing this moment. Another example of culturally significant material being used as a particular element in the worship gathering of this community is a musical piece by the band James entitled, *God Only Knows* (Booth, Glennie, Gott, 1990). The conversation on this evening centred on the church's relationship to culture. Dave and another community participant led the service, and suggested that the church has, at times, taken a very hostile stance to the surrounding culture. As a result of this, Dave remarked that the wider culture has retaliated by lashing back at the church. This song was then played for the community, with lyrics displayed on the screen, as an example of this retaliation:

You may say I am cynical, but I say man is flawed
He has a vague memory of before some fall
Behaving like a reptile, but talks of walking tall
If god is in his image, the almighty must be small
God only knows
Swaggart has been caught with his trousers round his knees
After damning me and you to hell for eternity
Sex and power and money is the prayer of these priests
They bribe their way past heaven's gates and steal a set of keys
God only knows
My guru has been sleeping with adepts and with sheep
While I was fucking celibate, self-righteous in belief
Yesterday he was god, now he is a creep
We fell upon each other starving for belief
God only knows
I speak in the name of god

I speak in the name of that white haired old man in the clouds
Always a man
Dispensing lightening justice from his fingertips
Watching you every second of the day
Just waiting for you to fuck up
I speak in the name of God
I'm his intermediary
I'm a Mullah, I'm a Priest, I'm a Vicar
If you want to go to God
You have to come through me
Is heaven full, oh lord, of these babbling preachers and
God-fearing bigots
All these self-righteous, self-appointed prophets because if so:-
I know where I'd rather be
Away from this cacophony
Away from this cacophony
God only knows

As this particular night progressed, other aspects of the church's relationship to culture were also introduced, and participants were asked to take part in an exercise that explored the various ways in which the church could engage with the surrounding culture. Specifically, we were invited to journey out into the city centre streets for a contemplative walk. On this walk we were asked to observe and pray for the city. We were told that we could engage the city by doing various activities such as picking up litter, striking up conversations with people we meet, or giving money to homeless persons. Some participants eagerly embraced this exercise, while others resisted. Several of the participants who resisted did so by opting for drinks at a local pub instead of walking the streets. For those who were more active in their engagement, observation and prayer became the primary forms of participation. Occasionally a participant would pick up a piece of litter, and I even witnessed one participant in a conversation with another individual, saying, 'God bless you' as he departed. As with many of the liturgical exercises, the community members discussed their experiences of walking the streets later that evening at the bar.

The *Novitas* community would also celebrate the Eucharist during their worship gatherings. This celebration occurred sporadically throughout my participation with the community and did not follow a set pattern. For instance, one night the Eucharist was celebrated in complete silence, with the scriptural texts describing Christ's

institution of communion appearing on the screen as a written prompt. On another evening, Coldplay's *Fix You* (Martin, Buckland, Berryman, Champion, 2005), was noticeably played during the celebration of the Eucharist—blending this liturgical activity with a popular piece of contemporary music which lyrically professes:

When you try your best, but you don't succeed
When you get what you want, but not what you need
When you feel so tired, but you can't sleep
Stuck in reverse
And the tears come streaming down your face
When you lose something you can't replace
When you love someone, but it goes to waste
Could it be worse?
Lights will guide you home
And ignite your bones
And I will try to fix you

One of the more visually oriented Eucharist celebrations occurred on the night that participants were invited to walk the city centre streets. Upon returning to the café, the participants found the space darkened, and the table and chairs moved from the centre of the room to the edges of the space. On the floor in the centre of the room, a series of tea light candles had been arranged in the shape of a large cross. Images of Christ, from ancient to medieval to modern, appeared on the screen. Ambient music played in the background as these series of images morphed from one to the other. The elements were placed towards the bottom of the screen, and participants were invited to come to this area and partake of the bread and the cup as they were inclined. Importantly, only Ethan, an ordained Methodist minister, presided over Eucharist celebrations. Although no explicit distinction was made when Dave led the community in this ritual, he clarified in an interview that, since he was candidating for ordination, it was actually an 'agape meal' when he led the ceremony.³⁵⁴

Video excerpts were a common element in the worship gatherings, and in addition to the various videos discussed in the above description, the *Novitas* liturgies also included video excerpts from television programs and advertisements, designed to

³⁵⁴ Dave, turn 104.

introduce various discussions. For instance, an excerpt from *The Apprentice* was employed to introduce the topic of rejection, and a frantic advertisement from the clothier *Howies*, which stressed the importance of pausing, was employed to introduce the topic of rest. Other videos used in the liturgy, such as an illustrated piece that depicted Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, or a poetry monologue depicting the experience of the Samaritan woman that Jesus met at Jacob's Well, possessed content that was explicitly religious. On one particular night, the content of the video was simply the *Novitas* participants themselves. The theme of the evening was solitude, and once again participants were invited to engage in various activities that had been set up around the café. One of the activities was for the participants to enter into the café's empty art installation space—which resembled a concrete cell—and quietly recite the *Jesus Prayer*. As participants engaged in this activity, a live camera captured their movements, and projected these to the video screen in the main café space.

Community Life Beyond the Wednesday Worship Gatherings

As indicated in the initial overview of this community, a small number of the *Novitas* participants engaged in other activities that took place outside the Wednesday night gatherings. One of these activities, a Sunday evening reflective service, formed during the time that I was participant in this community.

Reflective Service

Designed to offer a weekly meditative space within the city centre, the reflective service was initiated by several *Novitas* community participants, and convened at a local *Church of England* parish church. Dave and Ethan were not directly involved in this activity, and although *Novitas* participants organized the time, the priests of this parish church were present and would participate in the service. It was a quieter time, with notably less movement and discussion than a Wednesday night gathering. While the format of each evening varied slightly, a large measure of silent contemplation was a consistent ingredient. Approximately four to ten members of the community would gather at the church on a Sunday evening, and after fifteen minutes of conversation and tea, the group would make their way into the sanctuary space. Even though colourful, the lighting was dim, and ambient music played in the background—often continuing during the reflective portions of the service. After entering the worship space, the participants would situate themselves in the large

beanbags that had been set out in a circle. On the floor at the centre of the circle three candles were arranged on a series of small wooden platforms. The reflective service opened and closed with readings chosen from a book that contained a selection of liturgies from the *Iona Community*. The opening reading frequently followed a Trinitarian formula using inclusive language—welcoming the presence of ‘God, Christ, and Spirit’, or ‘the Creator, the Son, and the Spirit’. Similar to the opening ritual of a Wednesday night worship gathering, participants would take turns lighting the three candles in the centre of the space as this opening liturgy was read. As already noted, long periods of quiet reflection dominated these evenings, and most services would include participants reciting aloud a portion of that Sunday’s scripture reading, followed by an extensive time to reflect—often with ambient music playing softly in the background. On one evening, in addition to the scripture reading, a participant prepared a reading of his own, based upon that Sunday’s Gospel text. Through his adaptation of the text, this participant invited us to enter into the story of Jesus in the temple as a boy, imagining that we were different characters in this narrative. After introducing each character, the participant leading the time gave us an extended amount of space to reflect on what it could have been like to be that person. On other nights, the participants centred their time on prayer—employing various prayers from the *Iona Community*’s liturgy as prompts for quiet contemplation. Participants even shared requests for personal prayer on this night, and time was set aside for the community to quietly pray for each another.

Multi-Generational Gathering

The above weekly reflective service was not the only *Novitas* activity to take place on Sundays, and once a month a group of participants with children would gather for a multi-generational service on Sunday afternoons. Like the reflective service, this gathering also took place at the local parish church, with several families from that parish attending. Fifteen to twenty adults and children took part in this activity, and while most of the adults who chose to participate had children, several did not. The first gathering I participated in took place in the sanctuary space of the church and began with the customary candle lighting ceremony. One of the *Novitas* participants led the service, and as she voiced the familiar Trinitarian announcement that recognized the presence of God, the Son, and the life giving Spirit, various children were invited to light the three candles. After the candles were lit, the participants viewed a PowerPoint slideshow that emphasized their relationship to God as ‘dad’.

The slideshow featured photographs of the *Novitas* participants and children. As these were displayed, a female narrator read a text entitled ‘Father’s Love Letter’—which was an assortment of paraphrased scriptural passages arranged as a letter from God to one of God’s children. Following this slideshow, an assortment of biscuits and icings were made available to the children, and since it was close to Valentine’s Day, they were invited to consider love—and particularly God’s love—as they decorated the biscuits with the icing. After this exercise, the participants gathered again in a circle, where the minister of the parish closed their time together by celebrating communion.

The next multi-generational gathering I participated in was not as formal. The theme of the gathering was ‘solitude’, and participants conducted a ‘photographic walk’ from the local parish church to the *Fulcrum Café*. Meeting outside the parish church, the children and adult participants divided into smaller groups and meander through the city centre streets taking digital photographs of images and scenes that, for them, represented solitude. Some participants photographed abandoned spaces and empty alleys, while others captured portraits of individuals, leafless trees, and indiscriminate pieces of debris. Walking through the city centre streets taking photographs, participants made their way to the *Fulcrum Café*, where they reconvened as a larger group. During this closing time, as the adult and children participants sat around the café tables enjoying coffee, tea, and café snacks, the various digital images that were captured during the photographic walks were uploaded to a computer and projected on the large screen dropping from the ceiling.

Fulcrum Café Activities

As indicated in the above description of the history and development of the *Novitas* community, the *Fulcrum Café* served as the place where this emerging church gathered, as well as the place where they focused their missional efforts into the city centre. As also noted in the above description, a separate community developed around the *Fulcrum Café* that was in fact distinct from the *Novitas* community. The café staff would facilitate the activities of this distinct community—which included a board game night, a film screening, and the weekly Saturday evening / Sunday morning *Night Café*. On infrequent occasions, a *Novitas* participant might attend these gatherings, but the *Fulcrum Café* activities were predominately facilitated and

populated by individuals not associated with the *Novitas* community. Still, because of the *Fulcrum Café's* history and association with *Novitas*, it continued to symbolize the presence and hospitality of the *Novitas* community in the city centre. For instance, even though individuals participating in the *Fulcrum Café* activities did not belong to the *Novitas* community, some were aware of this emerging church's association with the café and were appreciative of the attention this community gives to the city centre. In fact, the awareness of the connection between *Novitas* and the *Fulcrum Café* goes beyond those participating in the café activities, and extends to those taking part in wider city centre life. For instance, on several different occasions when volunteering with the *Night Café*, I would be the only *Novitas* participant present. Yet, both those who were volunteering with the café, as well as some club goers we met and invited to the café, were aware of the connection between the two entities, and appreciative of this emerging church's efforts to serve the city through this activity.

Still, participants in the *Novitas* community repeatedly expressed a desire to diminish the distance between themselves and the *Fulcrum Café* community, and during my involvement with this emerging church they established an art initiative called *TRIP* in order to address this disconnect. *TRIP* was comprised of *Novitas* participants, and they were tasked with hosting various art installations in the café space that would integrate the participants from both *Novitas* and the café community. During the months that I participated with *Novitas*, *TRIP* organized its first art exhibition in the *Fulcrum Café*. Focused on the theme of 'solitude in a public space', this exhibit compellingly captured the missional outworking of the *Novitas* community in Wellingham. Seeking to address feelings of isolation experienced by city centre dwellers through explorations around the theme of solitude and loneliness in public spaces, members of the *Novitas* community invited one another, *Fulcrum Café* artists, and other members of the public to each spend a day isolated in the glass box that served as the café's art installation space and storefront window. Because this exhibition took place during Lent, parallel themes of fasting, reflection, penance and prayer also surfaced as members of the *Novitas* community each took their turn in the box. Projects such as these provided a concrete avenue for those involved with *Novitas* to engage the city centre with matters of faith and Christian belief. They also provided a bridge between the two communities of *Novitas* and *Fulcrum Café*.

Profiles and Narratives of Community Participants

Painting a vivid portrait of the current makeup of the *Novitas* community requires a detailed description of the narratives and profiles of those participating in this emerging church. In this section, I offer a deeper look into the identity of the community participants through the personal accounts of emergence given by interviewees. After offering a brief sketch of the interviewee's age, length of involvement with *Novitas*, and their current role in the community, I move on to give a fuller description of their past involvement with church and their reasons for emerging. This fuller description will not only identify the reasons that these interviewees have fastened themselves to *Novitas*, but it will also reveal the traditions and ecclesiological contexts out of which those participating in this community have emerged. Although these interviewees do not speak for the whole of this emerging church in a representative way, they do serve as key guides into this community, and their stories give an indicative account of the factors that might lead a person to emerge.

***Novitas* Participant – Dave**

As already indicated in the above section on history and development, Dave (35) is the current leader of *Novitas* community, and has been participating with this emerging church since its conception in 2001. At the time of the interview, Dave had been with the community for eight years. According to Dave, as the leader of *Novitas*, 'I head up the leadership team, and then there's a further role within that, I will lead the community in whatever way that looks like'.³⁵⁵ This can take the form of leading the weekly worship gatherings, providing pastoral care to community participants, and taking part in the steering group.

Even though his father was an ordained minister, Dave spent over ten years prior to university 'away from Christianity', and it was not until his early twenties that he 'came to faith'.³⁵⁶ Immediately prior to forming *Novitas*, he was at theological college for three years. Between getting married during this time and commuting

³⁵⁵ Dave, turn 8.

³⁵⁶ Dave, turn 32.

back and forth to college, Dave ‘didn't really settle into church for a few years’.³⁵⁷ In describing his involvement with church before theological college, Dave said, ‘I moved around quite a lot, so was involved with churches for nine months to a year, and then the pattern of my life has been that I would move on. They tended to be Anglican. They tended to be Anglican evangelical churches’.³⁵⁸ Importantly though, he ‘never had one of those really negative experiences of church’, and noted that in ‘those years when I was just looking at church it was fine’.³⁵⁹

Still, as Dave navigated through various church experiences during his time at theological college, he found certain aspects of these communities worrying. Dave explains:

When I was at college, I was engaged to my wife, who wasn't a Christian, and on a number of times we'd go to church together. I'd take her to some of the churches in [the city] where we were living, and we'd go along to them and she would feel pretty much alienated by what was going on—partly it may be the music style. It may be that she felt—I don't know—threatened or intimidated by the preaching style.³⁶⁰

These alienating feelings, brought about through style, prompted Dave and his partner to seek out an alt-worship community in their city. He describes their participation in this new community candidly, stating that, ‘it didn't function well as a community, but worship wise it was a very creative space’.³⁶¹ Dave continues his description of this space, stressing that, ‘it was very inclusive and allowed both Liz and myself to feel we could belong without having a strict set of values we had to believe in’.³⁶² Through this experience, Dave noticed the spiritual impact that alt-worship communities could have upon an individual, and this helped give shape to *Novitas*. He discloses:

Just travelling with Liz—my wife—on that journey, and seeing how that inclusion was actually a very missional and welcoming thing, and

³⁵⁷ Dave, turn 32.

³⁵⁸ Dave, turn 32.

³⁵⁹ Dave, turn 32.

³⁶⁰ Dave, turn 34.

³⁶¹ Dave, turn 34.

³⁶² Dave, turn 34.

when it came to taking communion, she could take communion there without feeling either like she was making... without feeling the pressure which there can sometimes be felt within churches, and slowly, in fact, she came to faith through it. So, as I reflected on that experience, I thought, 'well actually this is probably the case for many other people. How can we make church and worship something which is accessible, welcoming, and community focused?' And from that experience, time studying it and thinking about it at college, [I] came to Wellingham and had a blank sheet of paper, so...³⁶³

Indeed, Dave's experience in this alt-worship community helped give shape to *Novitas*, and his desire to create a space that would be accessible and welcoming could be heard throughout his interview. For instance, when discussing what they as a community found meaningful in their experience at *Novitas*, Dave remarked:

You know, we had a conversation last night where people were talking about what they valued, and someone said they valued that they're not pressured into doing things. Other people said they value a sense of inclusion—that sense of welcome. I think people value community—meeting with one another. And sometimes community works well, at other times it's not working well. People value, I think, faith which is rooted in ordinary everyday life rather than something which is detached from reality—or detached not from reality, but detached from their everyday experience.³⁶⁴

Dave himself feels 'very much at home' within this context, and he calls *Novitas* 'my church', because of this inclusion, welcome, and accessibility, saying, 'it's very much a community of people who I know, who I'm supported by, who I am connected with on many levels'.³⁶⁵

***Novitas* Participant – Barbara**

Another participant who has been with *Novitas* from its origins is Barbara (32). Moving to Wellingham three years before Dave and Liz arrived, Barbara and her partner have been with *Novitas* 'since it started'.³⁶⁶ Over those eight years of involvement, Barbara has taken on many roles within the community. From being 'involved in setting up *Novitas*' to 'being part of leadership team', she has been

³⁶³ Dave, turn 34.

³⁶⁴ Dave, turn 60.

³⁶⁵ Dave, turn 16.

³⁶⁶ Barbara, turn 10.

closely acquainted with this community since its inception.³⁶⁷ Yet, during the period that I participated with the *Novitas* community, Barbara had stepped down from the leadership team and had simply ‘gone back to being *a* member of the community’.³⁶⁸

Raised by a father who ‘was never really that involved in church’, and a mother who ‘was very involved in church’ [Church of Scotland], Barbara ‘just poodled along in Sunday school and thought, “Yeah, church is alright”,’ until she was eleven—at which time she ‘had a very profound experience of God’ at a church retreat.³⁶⁹ Because her parents had moved when she was younger, Barbara had never been baptized and so following this retreat, she was baptized in a local parish church in the north of England—where her parents were living at the time. Following this, Barbara became highly involved in the various churches her family attended. She commented:

So then I was baptized as an eleven year old and was very involved from that point on really in helping—not just attending youth groups, but running youth groups and playing in church music and all sorts of stuff. When we moved to [a county in the south of England] when I was a teenager, [I] got even more [involved], so by the time I was fifteen I was kind of running the youth program in church—basically with another adult. And they'd always said, ‘you know, you're really good at this’, and really encouraged me. I did a lot of church music and all sorts of stuff—which was great. The church that I went to in [the county where we lived] was a *Church of England* church, but more evangelical than the church I had been to when I was younger.³⁷⁰

Because of this evangelical influence, Barbara ‘basically did what most people [of an evangelical persuasion] do’ when she went to university, which was to connect with the *Christian Union*.³⁷¹ This experience would prove to be pivotal in her emergence, as Barbara’s initial reaction to the *Christian Union* at university was, ‘I can not cope with this’, and she ‘fell right off a cliff’, thinking ‘I can't do that kind of church’.³⁷² Specifically, Barbara was disturbed by their theology, which she perceived to be

³⁶⁷ Barbara was a part of the leadership team for five years. Barbara, turn 14.

³⁶⁸ Barbara, turn 14.

³⁶⁹ Barbara, turn 33.

³⁷⁰ Barbara, turn 33.

³⁷¹ Barbara, turn 33.

³⁷² Barbara, turn 33.

‘very conservative evangelical’, and certain activities that she considered lacking in contextual sensitivity.³⁷³ For example, she explained that the *Christian Union*,

Met on a Friday night! [laughing] I mean, that to me was... if we're going to talk about culture and church, that is the antithesis to me. You're a student, what are you doing on Friday night? I mean there's a place for singing hymns and praying, but it's not Friday night. So they were very different to me and they had a very specific kind of way of doing things, so I just kind of decided that I couldn't do that.³⁷⁴

Barbara continued to visit other evangelical churches around her university, ‘but wasn't really that keen’.³⁷⁵ She and her partner moved to Wellingham following university and ‘went around to loads of churches’, but ‘really struggled to find anywhere’.³⁷⁶ In the interview, Barbara described the myriad of frustrations she and her partner experienced as they explored various Christian communities in Wellingham, saying:

We went around to every where that we could get to, and it was either that we arrived and nobody even noticed that we were there, and we would sit in the pew and we'd turn around and go, ‘Hi’. And people would go, ‘Oh Hello’, and then go off and shelve their book somewhere or speak to their other neighbour or whatever. So we either felt we were kind of ignored and no one really noticed that we were new or that we'd been coming a few weeks. Or we'd turn up somewhere and two weeks after you'd been there they'd come and go, ‘So, do you want to run our youth program?’ Or ‘Do you want to be part of the music?’ And I was like, ‘You don't even know me, and I don't know you, and I don't know what your church is like, and I don't know what your theology is, and I certainly don't know your young people, and how do you know that's what I want to do, how have you even...’ But, it was this: we're a young married couple and we looked OK so we must be fine. I couldn't cope with that.³⁷⁷

Barbara's frustration reached a critical point when she and her partner went to a ‘very big evangelical church in Wellingham’, and ‘felt completely floored by it’.³⁷⁸ Noting the disconnect between her own culture and the culture of this Christian

³⁷³ Barbara, turn 34.

³⁷⁴ Barbara, turn 34.

³⁷⁵ Barbara, turn 34.

³⁷⁶ Barbara, turn 34.

³⁷⁷ Barbara, turn 39.

³⁷⁸ Barbara, turn 39.

community, she found herself thinking, ‘this is so bizarre... so not who I am or who I want to be’, and therefore decided that this expression of church was ‘not for us’, and ‘started trying to explore other things’.³⁷⁹ It was in this context that Barbara and her partner stopped participating in existing expressions of church in Wellingham, and began having the previously mentioned conversations around their dining room table that led to the formation of *Novitas*.

Barbara’s decision to stop participating in existing expressions of church and to move forward with the formation of *Novitas* was motivated by the desire she had to more closely connect her experiences in an ecclesial context with her experiences in a wider culture. When discussing what she valued about the *Novitas* community, and why she remained a part, Barbara said, ‘I wanted to use my contemporary culture in my worship, in my faith life, and not see a disconnect between the way I live and who I am, and the culture I live in and the context I respond to, and my faith’.³⁸⁰ Even though she did not ‘see how those two things could be disconnected’, her experiences at other churches seemed to suggest they could. Noting that these other churches ‘have come from a very different cultural context’, and they differ from her wider culture in ‘the way they behave and the things they prioritize’, Barbara perceived that there was a ‘church culture’ that only occasionally engaged with what she called: ‘real culture—the world, the real world, where I lived in Wellingham, who I am’.³⁸¹ Thus, what she found meaningful in her experience with this emerging community was how, ‘*Novitas* allows me to step outside of that sort of very churchy way of being’.³⁸²

***Novitas* Participant – Rebecca**

Rebecca (25) was a more recent participant in the *Novitas* community, having just started attending this emerging church three to four months prior to our interview.³⁸³

³⁷⁹ Barbara, turn 39.

³⁸⁰ Barbara, turn 18.

³⁸¹ Barbara, turn 18.

³⁸² Barbara, turn 18.

³⁸³ Prior to her current participation with *Novitas*, Rebecca did attend ‘a couple of times’ in the summer of 2007 when she was doing masters research. Rebecca, interview by author, Wellingham, 23 March 2009, Rebecca transcript, turn 8.

As a newer participant, Rebecca had no formal role with the community. Her earliest experiences with church were in the Anglo-Catholic wings of the *Church of England*. Rebecca explains that, ‘when I was little, my mum and dad were quite high Anglicans—we were very much, in a very, very... what most people think of as traditional church: going every Sunday, going to Sunday school, and all the rest’.³⁸⁴ Yet when she was six, Rebecca’s mother began taking her to a more charismatic expression of church. She explains that these gatherings were, ‘the first time I’d experienced more freer worship and people who clapped to the music, put their hands in the air’.³⁸⁵ Some aspects of this experience discomforted Rebecca, particularly when her ‘mum started speaking in tongues’, and as she got older she ‘lost interest in church’ and found it difficult to locate someone that she could ‘identify with within a Christian context’.³⁸⁶ After going to college, Rebecca ‘didn’t really think about God very much’ because she was pursuing acting and spent most of her time in the drama studio practising.³⁸⁷

This would change one day when she ‘literally walked in on’ the *Christian Union* as they were meeting in the drama studio.³⁸⁸ Rebecca believed that ‘they were kind of interesting because they just did stuff really differently from anything I’d seen before’, and through friendships made with the *Christian Union* she became involved in a church that was, according to her ‘completely different from any church I’d been to before’.³⁸⁹ She explains, ‘there [were] young people there. It was the kind of whole Matt Redman kind of songs and peoples, and guitars, and drums, and stuff’.³⁹⁰ Rebecca would participate in this community while she was in college, and then after moving to attend university she ‘went to a sort of more Pentecostal church’, which was ‘really, really big on the Spirit’.³⁹¹ Because of these early influential

³⁸⁴ Rebecca, turn 38.

³⁸⁵ Rebecca, turn 38.

³⁸⁶ Rebecca, turn 38.

³⁸⁷ Rebecca, turn 40.

³⁸⁸ Rebecca, turn 40.

³⁸⁹ Rebecca, turn 40.

³⁹⁰ Rebecca, turn 40.

³⁹¹ Rebecca, turn 40.

experiences, Rebecca suggests that, ‘most of what I would call my really Christian foundation and all the rest, is kind of within the charismatic evangelical tradition’.³⁹²

Following university, Rebecca moved to Wellingham and attended a church, which she characterized as charismatic evangelical, for two years. She thought this experience ‘was nice’, and remarked, ‘I liked it, but I think that at the end of the day, it just didn’t challenge me enough—or probably didn’t have [enough] interaction for me.’³⁹³ This lack of interaction, alongside questions she had about evangelical theology, created a growing dissatisfaction with this community and was a key impetus for Rebecca’s emergence. She explains:

I started to question the point of the services to be honest. As in, I didn’t see the point of singing forty-five minutes continually, other than—as someone who’s not a Christian, one of my non-Christian friends pointed out—other than to kind of brainwash you, and soften you up for the message that was coming... and, just the whole sort of passivity of it all. I’m not a passive person, just in my personality, so maybe that has a lot to do with it. So, just to stand and sing or to sit and listen to a preacher forty-five minutes, you do the same thing for forty-five minutes—sing, sing, sing, sing, sing, sit and listen, sit and listen. I was just bored. That’s why—honestly I was bored, and I felt sad that I was surrounded by so many different people that there wasn’t really space to talk to these people... so again, not much interaction.³⁹⁴

In addition to this lack of participation, Rebecca also began to question ‘general evangelical doctrine’.³⁹⁵ When asked if there were any doctrines in particular that troubled her, she responded, ‘Everything I guess, in that, if you think about it, it is quite narrow’.³⁹⁶ Using this particular evangelical church’s conservative views on human sexuality as an example, Rebecca continues:

there’s this whole thing, isn’t there, about evangelicals being more biblical and all the rest—or so they would like to believe—and I’m thinking, ‘no, it’s all interpretation’. It is all interpretation about how you see it. So while you think you’re more biblical, if I look back and

³⁹² Rebecca, turn 40.

³⁹³ Rebecca, turn 48.

³⁹⁴ Rebecca, turn 50.

³⁹⁵ Rebecca, turn 52.

³⁹⁶ Rebecca, turn 54.

think about what Jesus said, according to the bible, then well this...
then what you're doing is completely opposite.³⁹⁷

By the end of 2008, these above frustrations led Rebecca to seek out a community like *Novitas*. While doing master's work in Wellingham, she became 'interested in emerging church and what it's all about, and *Novitas* was a name that kept coming up'.³⁹⁸ Realizing that the church she was currently involved with 'wasn't the kind of church I wanted to be in anyway'—and because she was working a lot on the weekends—Rebecca began participating in the Wednesday night worship gatherings of *Novitas*.³⁹⁹ She said, 'I find the ideas behind emerging church really interesting, so I'd like to see what it's like lived out in practice'.⁴⁰⁰ In particular, Rebecca found the opportunities for discussion and interaction especially meaningful. When describing why she was a part of this community, she remarked:

It's a lot more discussion, it's a lot more opportunity to talk I think at *Novitas*, whereas, while at [the church I used to attend] there's lots of people and there's 1,000 people in one room, for a large part of that, you may be standing alone because you're just singing, or you're sitting quite passively listening to the preacher at the front, and I'm not very good at sitting still and being quiet [laughing]. So *Novitas*, I don't know, it just suits me better basically.⁴⁰¹

Thus, for Rebecca, 'how the evening is structured', with 'a lot of discussion' is what drew her to participate with this emerging church.⁴⁰²

***Novitas* Participant – Simon**

Like Rebecca, Simon (32) was also a more recent participant in the *Novitas* community, and at the time of our interview he had been involved with this emerging church for almost a full year.⁴⁰³ Also similar to Rebecca, Simon had no formal role with the community. He was 'brought up in the Apostolic Church', which he characterized as a small—possibly now defunct—Pentecostal church'.⁴⁰⁴ Simon

³⁹⁷ Rebecca, turn 54.

³⁹⁸ Rebecca, turn 14.

³⁹⁹ Rebecca, turn 14.

⁴⁰⁰ Rebecca, turn 28.

⁴⁰¹ Rebecca, turn 14.

⁴⁰² Rebecca, turn 18.

⁴⁰³ Simon, interview by author, Wellingham, 26 March 2009, Simon transcript, turn 10.

⁴⁰⁴ Simon, turn 42.

continued describing this community by noting the stress they placed upon scripture, leading him to conclude that the church of his upbringing was: ‘evangelical Pentecostal—if those two aren’t contradictory—but with emphasis on gifts of the Spirit, speaking in tongues, prophecy, *et cetera*’.⁴⁰⁵

Simon also noted that he had ‘quite a strict upbringing’, with parents and other family members who, for example, abstained from alcoholic beverages for religious reasons.⁴⁰⁶ This particular aspect of his upbringing was challenged when Simon went to university and joined the *Christian Union*. He explains:

So, I went to uni, went along to the CU, went along to the bar after the CU and saw people drinking and thought, ‘that’s not quite right’. Then I thought, ‘well, you know, either they’re Christians and you can drink, or they’re not Christians and you can’t’. So I went with, ‘you could’ and ‘they were’.⁴⁰⁷

Simon would spend the first few years at uni involved with the *Christian Union*—even serving as the evangelism secretary for a year—but in his final years of university, he got involved with leading an emerging community that took the form of an alternative worship service meeting every six weeks.⁴⁰⁸ This experience during those university years would mark Simon, and drive his interest in emerging church.

Following university, he spent a short time with the *Church Mission Society* in India, worked as a layperson for a youth group in the south of England, and then spent two years as a teacher in South Korea. While in South Korea Simon, ‘didn’t really bother’ with church, only attending a church several times and finding it ‘really quite boring’.⁴⁰⁹ When asked for more details regarding this experience, Simon remarked, ‘there was nothing new each time’, adding, ‘it’s got a very “American”, “black and white”, “evangelical”, “Christianity exported” [feel]’.⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁵ Simon, turn 42.

⁴⁰⁶ Simon, turns 44, 46.

⁴⁰⁷ Simon, turn 42.

⁴⁰⁸ Simon, turns 24, 47.

⁴⁰⁹ Simon, turn 60.

⁴¹⁰ Simon, turn 64.

Returning to the U.K. and settling in Wellingham, Simon began participating in *Novitas*. He describes his reasons for seeking out this emerging community by saying:

I think [the emerging church from my university days] was a large influence on that. I really enjoyed being a part of that... it was an atmosphere where you could kick around ideas and nobody told you you were going to burn. And you could say things that were heretical or damning or just explore ideas, and try and work out some of them and present them in... you know, for people to interact with sort of thing. I really enjoyed that with [the emerging church from my university days]. So yeah, the emergent church was definitely something I'd look for again, as a safe place to not have conventional ideas and be able to have doubts about things, and not people necessarily [saying], 'you must! You must believe! You must believe this.'⁴¹¹

Importantly, these frustrations stuck with Simon, and when initially asked why he sought out an emerging community like *Novitas*, he focused his response around his earlier experiences in church. Calling it a 'hymn sandwich', Simon said of these churches, 'you go and you sing the choruses—that's worship—and they're all happy and fairly vapid, and if you're not happy then there is something wrong with your life'.⁴¹² Continuing with the 'hymn sandwich' description, he persisted, 'and then you listen to some bloke speak for an hour', which Simon then noted, 'the only other time you sit down and listen to someone for that length of time is in lecture theatre'.⁴¹³ Speaking of these experiences, Simon remarked, 'it just doesn't meet me anywhere', and thus by contrast he finds the experience at *Novitas* meaningful because, as he suggested, 'it's where I go to meet with God and meet other people who meet with God'.⁴¹⁴ Specifically, it is the active engagement that takes place within this community that gives Simon a meaningful connection to his faith. He found that he has 'these vague, woolly feelings about God', but often does not take time to reflect upon them. So for Simon, 'going every Wednesday, if not gives me space, forces me to engage [with these feelings] on some level'.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹¹ Simon, turn 76.

⁴¹² Simon, turn 30.

⁴¹³ Simon, turn 30.

⁴¹⁴ Simon, turns 30, 34.

⁴¹⁵ Simon, turn 152.

Novitas Participant – Diana

Diana (32) had been involved with the *Novitas* community for almost five years at the time of our interview. Although a lay member of the community, she is a part of the pastoral team in this emerging church. When asked what this involvement entailed, Diana shared that it primarily meant pastoral care. She described the details of this responsibility, saying:

Pastoral care—I suppose at two levels. One level is just being welcoming for new people... so welcoming for new people, checking up on people in the community—how are they doing. If you don't see someone there for a few weeks, just giving them a call to see how they are. And then, there will be pastoral care issues, which I think the deeper issues—if you like—Dave will often deal with, but there are other issues that will come up that can be dealt with. And then meeting maybe a couple of times a year—two to three times a year—as a pastoral team just to see how are the people that we are responsible for doing... and trying to organize different ways of enabling people to get to know one another as well. So, every so often, there's a social that's specifically organized for newer people within the church—which will probably be held at Dave and Liz's house, but we'll try and be there for.⁴¹⁶

Diana's initial involvement with church began at a very young age. After being invited to attend a church at the age of five by a family who lived across the street from her, she remained a part of that community until leaving for university—even staying involved with the church after the family who invited her had moved.⁴¹⁷ It was 'a low *Church of England* church', and, as Diana describes it, 'it was quite Evangelical, but not way off to the right'.⁴¹⁸ She suspects that there were 'probably people who were very very Evangelical within it', and because the community had a family focus, Diana shared that she 'always felt slightly on the outside because my parents didn't go to church'.⁴¹⁹ Her involvement with communities located in the evangelical wings of the churches would continue through the first year of university, but this would change during her latter years at university as Diana became uncomfortable with certain aspects associated with these communities and,

⁴¹⁶ Diana, interview by author, Wellingham, 29 March 2009, Diana transcript, turn 10.

⁴¹⁷ Diana, turn 40.

⁴¹⁸ Diana, turn 42.

⁴¹⁹ Diana, turn 42.

‘experimented with different church communities’ during those years.⁴²⁰ She describes this transition by noting:

So, in the first year I went to a church that was a kind of, again, an Evangelical community church—I think you'd describe it as. And I could never quite get my head around it. I went to the *Christian Union*; *Christian Unions* in the UK are pretty right wing. I went to the... started going to the *Methodist-Anglican Society* my second year. So I went to the *Christian Union* for [the first part] of my degree, the *Methodist-Anglican* during my second year onwards—which is much more liberal... and by my second year, I had switched to the local university Anglican-Methodist Church—which was quite traditional and maybe not the style of music that I would have preferred, but was a very different theology. It was a theology that was a thinking theology and there was space for asking questions and there was space to explore faith, and a commitment to justice that I hadn't found in the *Christian Union* or any other church I'd been to.⁴²¹

Diana would continue to experiment with different Christian communities following her years at university, and when asked what was the reason for her emergence from these expressions of church, she stressed the impact that each tradition had upon her. After university, Diana went to a ‘very evangelical charismatic church’, and while she appreciated their social outreach, she noted that: ‘the theology I felt very unconformable with—disapproval of gay relationships, disapproval of other religions, that kind of thing that I was already questioning quite a lot’.⁴²² A year and a half stint at *Iona* also played a role in Diana’s emergence. She explains that, ‘*Iona* is very very much based... very focused on social justice, and I came back and I think a couple of things shifted’.⁴²³ First, because she was working as a university chaplaincy assistant and had Sunday responsibilities associated with that, Diana was unable to worship with the evangelical church she had previously attended, and second, because of her time at *Iona*, she explained that: ‘I was clearer about some of the positions I wanted to take in terms of morality. I wanted somewhere where I could find God in a different way’.⁴²⁴ It was during this period of transition and

⁴²⁰ Diana, turn 40.

⁴²¹ Diana, turn 42.

⁴²² Diana, turn 44.

⁴²³ Diana, turn 44.

⁴²⁴ Diana, turn 44.

searching that Diana became involved with the *Novitas* community. She describes this emergence, saying:

And I did find that space that I was looking for, but I also found people who cared and who were friendly and welcoming... I think *Novitas* was about community and about a different type of community, and people who talked about things happening in the world, and talked about them in a way that showed a caring response to that. So, when we went to the pub afterwards, I remember just one conversation—I can't even remember what it was about, but I remember the impression. Here are people who talk about politics, who talk about social issues, and it's not just about prayer, but it's about how prayer and worship and faith impact on the world around us... I think that was really important.⁴²⁵

For the majority of Diana's five years at *Novitas*, the community has met this need to explore her faith and find God in a different way. She remarked that this emerging church has traditionally 'met all the needs for God that I felt that I missed in other churches'—which included, 'that sense of finding God where I was at, of exploring faith, of worshiping God in creative ways, of God being part of life and the world and recognizing God in other people, and that sense of God being present in the world'.⁴²⁶ Yet, at the time of our interview, Diana was finding it difficult to articulate her faith, and was beginning to question the importance of these interactions with the community—particularly the worship activities on Wednesday nights. Diana said, 'I sometimes struggle with Wednesday nights because I don't think my faith is at the place that, at least the leadership outwardly appears to be'.⁴²⁷ Given this, the Sunday night reflective services have become much more meaningful for Diana. She suggested:

Sunday evening is a place where there is space for reflection, and space within reflection. I think if God exists, and if God is going to touch me at all, or if I'm going to touch God, it's going to be through... it's not going to be through lots of words, it's going to be through some kind of encounter. And I think that the place of encounter for me is probably silence. Words can sometimes affect me, as music can affect

⁴²⁵ Diana, turn 45.

⁴²⁶ Diana, turn 84.

⁴²⁷ Diana, turn 38.

me, but I think too many words—people telling me things—is not where I'm at.⁴²⁸

Thus, even though Diana found the conversations at the worship gatherings on Wednesday evenings difficult, the space carved out for reflection on Sunday nights was deeply meaningful to her as she navigated these spiritual uncertainties.

Novitas Participant – Ethan

As noted in the section on history and development, Ethan (32) had been with the *Novitas* community for four and a half years prior to our interview—serving as the Methodist minister in this ecumenical partnership. In addition to overseeing the daily operations of the *Fulcrum Café*, Ethan is on the leadership team of *Novitas*. He describes the responsibilities of this team as a ‘kind of shared ownership / leadership of *Novitas* on the whole generally. That's worked out in leading some of the Wednesday night sessions, and having strategic input in where things are going and thinking about community stuff’.⁴²⁹

Ethan ‘wasn't brought up in church’, but went to ‘a public school where they have chapel’, and so his ‘impression of church was all based around that’.⁴³⁰ He described this experience of church as ‘Anglican’, ‘traditional’, and just, ‘what you have to do before maths class’.⁴³¹ Thus for Ethan, church was ‘very boring’, and he ‘didn't really have that much time for it’.⁴³² This would change in his teenage years, when he ‘was invited to youth disco thing’ and there, ‘became a Christian’. Ethan emphasised the shaping impact this youth group had on him—noting, ‘so my influence was very much from [the] evangelical, charismatic side of things’.⁴³³ Indeed, this evangelical influence gave shape to Ethan’s future, and after two years of involvement with this youth group, he went on a ‘year out mission program’ in a town in the north of England. Ethan elaborates on this year experience of ‘working

⁴²⁸ Diana, turn 30.

⁴²⁹ Ethan, turn 10.

⁴³⁰ Ethan, turn 34.

⁴³¹ Ethan, turn 34.

⁴³² Ethan, turn 34.

⁴³³ Ethan, turn 34.

with a team of volunteers, living in a house together, working alongside a church', by commenting:

So I was always very missional. My whole reason for doing that was, I wanted to share with my friends and those people who didn't know God, and didn't know about church, and share a side to it which I found, which I thought was quite good.⁴³⁴

Following his year in the north of England, Ethan spent a year in bible college, because, as he expressed it, 'I hadn't really gotten my head around the bible at all'.⁴³⁵ During this time, he began lay preaching in the Methodist church, and continued that ministry while working a job in the information technology field. While working and lay preaching, Ethan felt 'a call to ministry', which he said he 'explored in my home church and with people I knew—people at the college I went to'.⁴³⁶ Following this period of exploration, he decided to candidate for ordained ministry 'as somebody who was going to... wanted to work on the edge and do pioneering work and work with people—with non-Christians'.⁴³⁷ This decision to do pioneering work 'on the edge' was a pivotal factor in Ethan's participation in emerging church.

Narrating the transitions that brought him to Wellingham and *Novitas*, he remarked:

I want to be part of a church where I can invite my friends to, which is kind of important to me. So, [I] candidate for the ministry, trained, then my first appointment [was] in [a rural community]—very traditional. A part of the post was this community project, which was a second hand clothes shop, and [I] transformed that into a drop in centre / community cafe type thing, and planted a church basically. And that was really... kind of gave me the energy. I did that for three years and just turned around to the church and said, 'look, this is great but I want to be working with my generation, I want to be not rural but in a city'. So they gave me the opportunity here to do something new and creative.⁴³⁸

Ethan's desire to work with his generation in an urban context was realized when he was sent to Wellingham by the *Methodist Church*, and, as indicated in the above history and development section, brought him into contact with the *Novitas* community. As a minister within this community, Ethan has found meaning within

⁴³⁴ Ethan, turn 34.

⁴³⁵ Ethan, turn 34.

⁴³⁶ Ethan, turn 34.

⁴³⁷ Ethan, turn 34.

⁴³⁸ Ethan, turn 34.

the friendships that he has formed with community participants. In describing these relationships, he noted, 'what I've noticed about *Novitas* compared to other places I've been involved in, is actually people in the community are my friends'.⁴³⁹ After suggesting that this has not always been the case in other places he has been, Ethan, concluded that at *Novitas*, 'it's very easy for me to be myself'.⁴⁴⁰ Still, as Ethan's family situation developed, to include a partner and children, he has struggled to see *Novitas* as 'our church', and he feels 'a bit more distance from it', and at times sees his role in the community as a 'minister to these people', instead of a participant within the community. Thus, for Ethan, the change in the makeup of his family, and the increase in familial responsibilities, has resulted in a change in his relationship to the *Novitas* community.

***Novitas* Participant – Kathryn**

Kathryn (34), who was a member of the leadership team at *Novitas*, had been participating with the community for three and a half years prior to our interview. Like Diana, she was a lay member of the community, but had certain formal responsibilities that came with being a part of the leadership team. When describing what it means to be on the leadership team at *Novitas*, Kathryn said:

It's always tricky because people ask me what that means, and it's tricky to say sometimes. I guess the role of... the point of being on the leadership team is to guide the strategic development of the community, to keep an eye on pastoral issues, and just how it's functioning on a week by week basis. It's a... because I'm not paid and I'm not full time, I can't do as much as Dave and Ethan in terms of leading stuff. I don't have the time, but I do sometimes. So, yeah, it's kind of guiding it and being responsible and that kind of thing.⁴⁴¹

Although Kathryn was 'brought up in a Methodist church', she left this community when she was sixteen because, in her opinion at the time, those in the church who were considered 'really, really good Christian people' were 'breaking the rules'.⁴⁴² She said, 'they were smoking, they were sleeping around, they were doing this, that, and the other. I remember thinking, "wow, what a bunch of hypocrites. I don't want

⁴³⁹ Ethan, turn 26.

⁴⁴⁰ Ethan, turn 26.

⁴⁴¹ Kathryn, interview by author, Wellingham, 26 March 2009, Kathryn transcript, turn 8.

⁴⁴² Kathryn, turn 18.

to be associated with hypocrites”. So I left church, which when you're sixteen makes a lot of sense’.⁴⁴³

Following a span of ten years away from church, and a move to Wellingham, Kathryn ‘started to go back into the church’, eventually becoming a member of a local Methodist community, where she participated for three years.⁴⁴⁴ Prior to this membership in a Methodist church, Kathryn ‘went to a quite high Anglican church for a while’.⁴⁴⁵ Both of these more recent experiences of church frustrated Kathryn and led to her seeking out the emerging community of *Novitas*. She described her annoyances with the Anglican community by commenting:

Well, in this high Anglican church, if you wanted to join a house [group] you had to contact somebody and they would decide which house group you went into. I don't do with being dictated to. I like to make my own decisions. So, that annoyed me in that way, and I didn't like all of the high Anglican bowing, and this, that, and the other stuff.⁴⁴⁶

Kathryn's frustrations with the Methodist community were also visible—with her even making the remark in the interview that, ‘it was driving me crazy’.⁴⁴⁷

Specifically, Kathryn was frustrated by what she saw as the church's ‘blinkered way of looking at things’, and by her perception that ‘you couldn't question anything’.⁴⁴⁸ She gave the following example from her time with the Methodist community, noting how instances like these prompted her emergence.

I was in a house group once where they said, ‘Jesus said, “I am the way”’, and I said, ‘I think that seemed a little bit unfair’. And they just kind of looked at me. And I said, ‘well it is. You know, what about all the people who think they're doing the right thing by being Muslim or Jews or anything like that’? And the response was, ‘shall we move on’. [I] was like, ‘no, we shalt move on. This is really important’. So, it was all those kind of things which led me to be

⁴⁴³ Kathryn, turn 18.

⁴⁴⁴ Kathryn, turn 18.

⁴⁴⁵ Kathryn, turn 44.

⁴⁴⁶ Kathryn, turn 48.

⁴⁴⁷ Kathryn, turn 18.

⁴⁴⁸ Kathryn, turn 26.

quite dissatisfied with where I was, and shortly after that I discovered *Novitas*.⁴⁴⁹

Choosing to seek out an emerging community in Wellingham as a result of a stimulating conversation she had with an emerging church participant from a different city, Katherine quickly established a meaningful connection with the *Novitas* community. She appreciates ‘the fact that it is completely inclusive’, that everyone is ‘relatively equal’, and ‘that you can ask questions’.⁴⁵⁰ Indeed, it is this permissibility to ask questions that Kathryn finds particularly meaningful in her experience with *Novitas*. She comments:

I like giving my opinion and there's always an opportunity at *Novitas* to give your opinion. You never have to sit there. One of the worst things about regular church is having to sit and just take what someone says. Even though you don't agree, you can't... it's much more awkward to heckle from the back.⁴⁵¹

Yet at *Novitas*, Kathryn has found that, ‘you can challenge, you can ask questions, and it gives me all I need I suppose—in terms of I need the opportunity to ask questions and challenge and things like that’.⁴⁵²

Patterns of Emergence

The above narratives provide an indicative description of emergence for *Novitas* participants. Through these accounts, certain patterns are revealed that give insight into the ecclesial backgrounds of *Novitas* participants, their frustrations with churches they are emerging from, the desires driving their emergence, and how these desires are met by their experiences in this emerging community.

While these interviewees had exposure to a range of different traditions within the wider Christian community, much of their formative experiences came from the evangelical and charismatic wings of these churches. As a result, many of the frustrations they expressed were aimed at this tradition. In describing their frustrations, the participants highlighted the rigidity and narrowness in evangelical

⁴⁴⁹ Kathryn, turn 26.

⁴⁵⁰ Kathryn, turn 26.

⁴⁵¹ Kathryn, turn 42.

⁴⁵² Kathryn, turn 42.

theology, the lack of opportunity to question these doctrines, the alienating and unimaginative style of worship in these churches, and the disconnect they experienced between the evangelical church and their own cultures. These frustrations led the participants to seek out a community that was more accessible and welcoming—which gave them space for interaction, where they could explore their faith in the midst of their doubts. They also had a desire to see the culture of the church connect more closely with their own culture—and the culture of their friends—in new and creative ways. Many of these desires were realized in the *Novitas* community. Indeed, participants found their experience in this emerging church meaningful because it provided a welcoming and inclusive environment, which gave them a space for asking questions, challenging theology, and exploring faith in unique and diverse ways—ways they had not encountered in their previous experiences of church.

Findings from the Novitas Community

With this overview of the *Novitas* community complete, I now turn my attention towards drawing out the research findings from the above material. This is done through an in depth presentation of the noteworthy features and themes that surfaced during my investigation into this emerging church. In the initial segment of this presentation, the arrangement of this data takes a narrative form—allowing for the particulars that I observed through participation and the voices that I interacted with through interviews to shape the overall structure of this material. The second segment of this presentation is drawn from the focus group schedule that was used to validate my fieldwork data. Although the complete focus group schedule can be found in Appendix K, I am including the material in this chapter as a summarizing review of my research findings.

Features and Themes

Although I engaged in a period of familiarization prior to joining the *Novitas* community, which was primarily facilitated through data collection via the internet, my first embodied encounter with this emerging church took place on a Wednesday night during one of their weekly gatherings.

Vital Nature of Wednesday Worship Gathering

While some researchers place profound import upon the loosely arranged nature of emerging churches, seeking to de-emphasize the significance of the formal gatherings of these communities,⁴⁵³ I quickly discovered that these structured times actually served as vital portals into the life of the community—not only for myself, but also for others who sought to involve themselves with this emerging church. In fact, a number of interviewees, when speaking of their involvement in *Novitas*, straightforwardly disclosed that their participation was limited to Wednesday nights. When I asked Rebecca, how she would describe her involvement in *Novitas*, she responded, ‘Pretty minimal if I’m honest. I go along on the Wednesday evening meeting. I try to get there as much as I can, but my work doesn’t always allow for that.’⁴⁵⁴ Even though Rebecca had only been participating with the community for five months, her pattern of involvement found congruence with others who had participated with *Novitas* for longer. Simon, who began his association with *Novitas* over a year ago, said, ‘I turn up on Wednesdays really. I don’t think it goes much further than that.’⁴⁵⁵ Although he did participate in ‘the occasional social thing’, he maintained that involvement for him was ‘mostly just turning up at the moment’.⁴⁵⁶ Likewise, Barbara, a veteran *Novitas* participant, when asked to describe a typical month of involvement for her, said simply, ‘I go to Wednesday nights’.⁴⁵⁷ When given space to expound upon that statement, she continued, ‘Yeah, that’s what I would say is currently my extent. It would have been very different if you’d asked me six months or a year ago, but yeah, I go to Wednesday nights. That’s enough for me at the moment.’⁴⁵⁸ These responses, combined with my observations as a participant, gave clear indication that the Wednesday night gathering served as a vital focal point for the life of the *Novitas* community. Moreover, since many of the latent ideals and values that serve to characterize this emerging church reached a state of tangibility during these times, a careful examination of the significance that participants

⁴⁵³ See for instance: Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (London: SPCK, 2006), pp. 90-102.

⁴⁵⁴ Rebecca, turn 10.

⁴⁵⁵ Simon, turn 16.

⁴⁵⁶ Simon, turns 16,18.

⁴⁵⁷ Barbara, turn 83.

⁴⁵⁸ Barbara, turn 85.

attached to these gatherings will prove essential in establishing the prominent features of *Novitas*.

For those participating in the community gatherings on Wednesday evenings, the significant features of this time together extended well beyond the liturgical practices associated with the worship activities of the group to include other aspects, such as the communal activities that preceded and followed the formal times. Indeed, when Dave was asked in an interview to speak about the community's values, he responded with this account:

People like the social aspect to it. I think Richard, yeah Richard who comes to *Novitas*, said to me at the bar one... not at the bar, at *Fulcrum*, at the café... he orders a pie and said, 'you know, I only come for the pies and the beer afterwards'. So whilst he said that he was messing about when he said it, I think what he was saying in that was you know, [for] some people their favourite bit is chatting at the pub afterwards—and they will chat about what we talked about at *Novitas*, and they'll share their lives with people and enjoy that sense of fellowship.⁴⁵⁹

Yet, even though the significance of the Wednesday night experience for the participants extended beyond the confines of the structured portion of the community gatherings, the specific ritual that had been instituted by the community served to mark off a restricted space for their ecclesial performances. Indeed, the lighting of the three candles in the name of the creator God, God's Son, and God's life giving Spirit established the beginning of the formal worship gathering of the community on a Wednesday night. According to Barbara, the ritual was conceived 'because when we first started out we wanted to acknowledge that we were meeting... openly acknowledge and invite the presence of God, and note that moment'.⁴⁶⁰ These candles would remain lit during the entire formal gathering—often on a small coffee table situated towards the centre of the café space—and would either be ceremonially extinguished or carried out of the room to signify the conclusion of the liturgically oriented time.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁹ Dave, turn 72.

⁴⁶⁰ Barbara, turn 89.

⁴⁶¹ On at least one occasion, the candles were neither extinguished nor removed from the room at the conclusion of the formal gathering. Because no attention was drawn to the fact that they remained lit as the session drew to a close, I interpreted this anomaly as an oversight on the part of the service

While some interviewees such as Diana specifically mentioned this candle ceremony as the most significant *Novitas* ritual for her, others were more ambivalent about its importance in the community. Kathryn explained, ‘I don't think we should light the candles every week. I don't think it's necessarily important, but other people find it helpful, so...’⁴⁶² She then concluded, ‘it wouldn't bother me if we didn't do it all.’⁴⁶³ Yet, despite its mixed reception, this particular ritual did seem to accomplish its purpose in marking off an intentional space for the liturgical activity of the community, as well as acknowledging the presence of God in the midst of their community. Rebecca’s interview comments on this ritual appropriately summarized the way a number of community participants interpret this practice. When asked about the most significant practices of *Novitas* for her, she remarked:

Things that stand out are the lighting of the candles at the beginning and the blowing out of the candles at the end. I think it really nicely marks out that time of real, ‘this is church’. I know it's church from the beginning—or it should be church from the beginning, as soon as you walk into the building—but I like that kind of marking out of time, like clearly, with that.⁴⁶⁴

Still, while the degree of significance assigned by the participants to this candle lighting ritual varied, a thorough presentation of the attitudes and activities present both within and outside of this marked off space will provide critical support in outlining the key features of this emerging church.

Space for Theological Exploration and Discussion

Of particular significance in describing the nature of these formal times is the manner in which the overall shaping attitudes and values of the community persisted during the more formal activities undertaken during the space marked off by the candle

organizer instead of an intentional action undertaken in an attempt to convey some liturgical meaning. Similarly, on another occasion the candles were set out, but never lit. I also interpreted this as an oversight on the part of the service organizer. Author’s field notes, Wellingham, 11 March 2009; Author’s field notes, Wellingham, 1 April 2009.

⁴⁶² Kathryn, turn 108.

⁴⁶³ Importantly, Kathryn maintained this unfavorable attitude towards any type of repeated practice. Before singling out the candle lighting ritual, she said, ‘so, I'm not really into rituals. I like them sometimes, but the trouble with rituals is that when you go over them and over them, they become meaningless.’ Kathryn, turn 106.

⁴⁶⁴ Rebecca, turn 94.

lighting ritual. For instance, interviewees consistently articulated the conviction that *Novitas* was a community where individuals could openly discuss and question their faith commitments. When asked what they believed their community valued, a majority responded in a fashion similar to Diana, who suggested that they appreciated ‘the freedom to explore their faith, to discuss their faith, to not be told, “this is right and this is wrong”’.⁴⁶⁵ Consequently, a substantial portion of the community’s activity during the formal gatherings was devoted to theological exploration and faith inquiry. Barbara, in summarizing what takes place during these Wednesday night gatherings, offered this simplified account:

We get together and drink coffee. We light some candles. Somebody poses a question. We talk about the question. We feed back about the question. We then pose another question. Then we talk about that. Then we feed that back. Then we go, "Oh, OK, that was interesting," and go to the pub. That's a horribly simplistic... but that is basically... there is... I mean we say we're really creative and we do all this crazy stuff all the time and it's not. There is a real strict structure to what we do and it's been developed over many years, and there's very good reasons why it is the way it is.⁴⁶⁶

Admittedly this witty response lacks the thickness that a more nuanced portrayal of the evening generates, but Barbara’s pared down narrative insightfully reveals the high degree of questioning that existed within this community. Indeed, the consistency in allowing for and encouraging theological inquiry across both the informal and formal group interactions was remarkable. As already noted, this insistence upon being open to theological investigation resulted in the materialization of a perceptible pattern in these formal interactions, where the gatherings resembled more of a religious education course than a worshipping congregation. In fact, even when the community incorporated more discernible liturgical elements, the emphasis would often be upon exploring various rituals and practices hewn from a diverse array of ecclesial traditions—with education on how these customs were incorporated into the life of other Christian groups being a key component. A fitting example of this occurred on Epiphany, where, as I described above, the community partook in a number of rituals from various Christian traditions that were associated with this feast. From the enacting of a house blessing to the consuming of a king

⁴⁶⁵ Diana, turn 50.

⁴⁶⁶ Barbara, turn 87.

cake, as each individual ritual was enacted, a definite period of explanation would occur, educating those gathered on the significance of these practices in their distinct settings.

Since theological exploration and discussion existed at the core of the *Novitas* worship gatherings, a plurality of belief—and even unbelief—was highly valued and enthusiastically celebrated by those participating in this emerging community. For instance, Rebecca emphasised notions of plurality when speaking of the differences that she has experienced in being a part of this emerging church. When asked to share why she had chosen to spend time with the *Novitas* community, Rebecca responded,

In the church I've been in before, you can pretty much safely assume that everyone believed the same thing. And the person sitting next to you? You can probably tell someone else exactly what they believed without even talking to them. Generally, that's the feeling I get. Whereas at *Novitas*, you cannot make any assumptions, and I like the whole, kind of, plurality of the doctrines I guess, and that there's people from a lot of different backgrounds.⁴⁶⁷

While I would certainly question the ability of one individual to predict what another individual might or might not believe, the remarkable situation that Rebecca alludes to in this scenario is the way in which the plurality of participants' beliefs are allowed to contribute to the shaping of the community discourse in *Novitas*.

Examples of the plurality of belief in this emerging church include various positions on the existence of God and vacillating interpretations of Christ's resurrection. In our interview, Diana disclosed that,

I know that there are people in our church that don't believe in God and maybe I... I guess I've become one of them, but there was... I'm kind of borderline—just on that border. But there is at least one person who has said very, quite openly for quite a while, 'I don't believe in God'.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁷ Rebecca, turn 30.

⁴⁶⁸ Diana, turn 98.

Other participants in the *Novitas* community, while not questioning the existence of God, did express additional uncertainties when reflecting on the beliefs of the community—including vacillating interpretations of Christ’s resurrection. For instance, Barbara, revealed, ‘I know there are people in *Novitas* who don’t believe in the virgin birth, or struggle with the actuality of the resurrection.’⁴⁶⁹ Indeed, when discussing with Ethan the candle lighting ceremony that took place at *Novitas*, he disclosed how this ritual was of particular importance to him because it centred *Novitas* on God and it invited those participating to follow Christ. Elaborating then on the person of Christ, Ethan expounded, ‘who is son of God, died for us, rose again. Kind of fundamental, but I might kind of think a bit carefully of how you unpack rose again’.⁴⁷⁰

While all subject matters remained open for exploration and discussion in this emerging community, when debates turned to ecclesiological significant practices, differences between the community leadership and the community participants began to surface. For instance, the participants were more supportive of the project of reinterpreting the meaning of baptism than were the leaders. Barbara’s description of the conversations she held with the community leaders in the planning stages of an upcoming baptism exemplify well this tension:

Dave and Ethan have very specific ideas of how this was going to be done and what it meant and who was going to do it, and I got sick of the sound of my own voice saying, ‘But why? What does that mean? Why? What does that mean? Why are we baptizing her like this? Why does she have to have a certificate? Who’s church is she joining?’ All of this kind of stuff and to the point where I just thought we’d had that discussion so many times it wasn’t fruitful anymore and they had this certain perception of how it was going to be and I felt I’d raised enough of my questions enough times to say, ‘OK, it’s not how I would choose to do it, but I will accept that you both have specific ideas and therefore I’m going to go with that’.⁴⁷¹

Indeed, the community leaders did have specific ideas regarding baptism, as indicated in Dave’s comments in the above section on the history and development

⁴⁶⁹ Barbara, turn 151.

⁴⁷⁰ Ethan, turn 114.

⁴⁷¹ Barbara, turn 129.

of *Novitas*, and thus sought to follow the interpretation and methods of their denominations when conducting this ritual. In discussing what a person must believe to belong to the *Novitas* community, Dave remarked, ‘one of the values—the rooted value—says that we affirm a relationship with the Nicene Creed, so we’re kind of called back to that ancient, third century creed’.⁴⁷² Yet, in clarifying this he said, ‘but we don’t say we believe this full stop—we say, you know, people will struggle with the virgin birth within that, people will struggle with what it means for Christ to rise from the dead’.⁴⁷³ Recognizing these struggles within the community, Dave then continued:

If people want to go through something like baptism—as you’ve already talked about it—then we’ll follow a baptism service from the Anglican or Methodist church. So, to be a part in that strict baptismal type way, then you need to make promises which are made by the wider church.⁴⁷⁴

Thus, when considering the baptismal practice of the *Novitas* community, the leadership of this emerging church followed the prescribed methods of their denominations, because, as Dave suggested, ‘we’re not baptizing into *Novitas*, we’re baptizing into the church’.⁴⁷⁵

Inclusivity

While these aspects of questioning and enquiring saturated the life of the *Novitas* community, several other related themes also surfaced during my participation, and they too represent constituent features of this emerging church. The first of these related themes to consider is that of inclusivity. Because of the community’s desire to create open spaces for theological investigation, a number of individuals who candidly questioned their faith commitments were readily welcomed into full community participation. Indeed, in the interviews that I conducted with participants, this custom of integrating ‘voices of doubt’ into the worshipping life of the community repeatedly surfaced as a key principle. For instance, when describing what she thought the *Novitas* community valued, Kathryn shared this perspective:

⁴⁷² Dave, turn 124.

⁴⁷³ Dave, turn 124.

⁴⁷⁴ Dave, turn 124.

⁴⁷⁵ Dave, turn 126.

I think it values freedom to express yourself. Let me think. The inclusivity, the acceptance, and I think it values the opportunity to discuss and debate and argue points. I mean there are people who go to *Novitas* who aren't Christians, who say they don't believe in God, but they're still exploring and they feel that they can do that without someone breathing down their neck all the time saying, 'Now you've got to make a commitment'. So I think in terms of *Novitas*, that's probably what people value, but other people may disagree with me. That's just my perception.⁴⁷⁶

In order to maintain this inclusive environment for those who may question matters of faith and belief, the community of *Novitas* has chosen to eschew certain confessional aspects prominent in other ecclesiastical contexts. For instance, this emerging church avidly resists the establishment of a doctrinal criterion for membership because, in the words of one of its founding members, 'there [are] people within *Novitas* who struggle to believe, who are struggling with their faith, but they aspire to believe, so I don't want there to be a central point of doctrine which is either a point of inclusion or exclusion.'⁴⁷⁷ In addition to their reticence towards using explicit confessional standards in determining membership, the *Novitas* community also avoided certain liturgical activities that might exclude those participants who are questioning their beliefs. Congregational singing was noticeably absent from the worship gatherings of this community, and when I asked Dave, about this idiosyncrasy in an interview, he explained that this feature was partly rooted in a desire for inclusion.

From my experience—which we talked about earlier—of going to church with a non-Christian, singing is awful for a non-Christian because you have to sing something which you totally disagree with. And if we're saying the importance of words within the Christian church, and then we're encouraging people to stand up and sing things which they don't believe in, there's something kind of out of kilter there.⁴⁷⁸

Other participants shared this perspective, and when asked what practices in the more traditional or institutional ways of being church were avoided in their community, every interviewee suggested that congregational singing was avoided at *Novitas*. In her response to this question, Diana stressed the similarity that she saw between

⁴⁷⁶ Kathryn, turn 52.

⁴⁷⁷ Dave, turn 26.

⁴⁷⁸ Dave, turn 114.

listening to a sermon and participating in corporate singing. She remarked, ‘I think when you have a sermon, you’re being told what to think. When you have songs, you’re also... actually there’s an awful lot of theology that comes out of songs.’⁴⁷⁹ Importantly then, engaging in singing as a communal practice denotes the possible existence of a shared theological outlook amongst the participants, and this threatens the open space that has been carved out for questions and discussion. Indeed, most corporate acts that required participants to utter the same words in unison were avoided in *Novitas*—with a notable exception being the worship gathering where members were invited to join in a recitation of *The Jesus Prayer*.⁴⁸⁰

What is more, concerns for inclusivity extended beyond matters of faith and belief at *Novitas*, and the community’s egalitarian emphasis created a climate that fostered full participation amongst its members regardless of an individual’s gender or sexuality. In an interview, Barbara described this feature as a vital component of the *Novitas* ethos. After asserting that she believed her community valued ‘a very open and inclusive form of membership’, Barbara elaborated upon this characteristic by suggesting, ‘for instance, the amount of gay people at our community is very very high in comparison. And I think the male female balance is much more healthy than in a lot of churches that I’ve been through. So I think we value all of those sorts of things.’⁴⁸¹

Even though *Novitas* conceived of itself as an inclusive community, certain parameters—often found at more tacit levels—did exist within this community. For instance, although this community remained committed to the exploration of diverse theological perspectives, they did identify themselves as being distinctly Christian. Consequently, this specific recognition offered the participants a broadly determined

⁴⁷⁹ Diana, turn 56.

⁴⁸⁰ Still, as noted in the above description of the worship gatherings, on the night in which the participants were invited to recite *The Jesus Prayer*, there were a number of rituals being simultaneously offered, which resulted in a largely decentred worshiping experience. Furthermore, since the recitation of *The Jesus Prayer* took place in the café’s art installation space, with the activity of those in that space being streamed via live video into the main café and worship area where participants could watch on the large screen, only those who chose to enter into the art installation space during that time would have participated in the recitation.

⁴⁸¹ Barbara, turn 29.

framework in which to situate their discussions and enquiries. Barbara explicitly revealed how this identity helped to shape the discourse of this community. When discussing the question of what determined the beliefs of *Novitas*, she commented, ‘we are ultimately a Christian community, so there is this sense to have an orthodoxy or an understanding that is rooted in the wider Christian history. So we're not a Buddhist group or a... whatever.’⁴⁸² Indeed, as indicated in the above descriptions, the *Novitas* community conceived of themselves as being historically connected to the wider Christian church through their relationship with the Anglican and Methodist denominations, and by drawing upon scripture, the sacraments, and various Christian traditions in forming their identities. Interestingly, later in my interview with Barbara, she returned to the theme of being rooted in the wider Christian tradition, commenting further on how the specific Christian identity of this community informed the way in which they engaged with theological discussion—even as the discussion was impacted by the presence of those who did not share these same Christian beliefs:

I come back to my statement about there are tacit beliefs within the community. I mean we are a Christian community in the way our theology and all the stuff that we've talked about, but I would say... I mean I know there are people who hold very different views to some of the views I would think are very core. I know there are people who come to *Novitas* who even don't believe in God and would profoundly say, ‘I really don't believe in God, but I'm still a part of this community’. So there's a massive challenge in that. But yet tacitly... there's always... there's got to be something that hangs us together, otherwise we'd be a really random group of people, so, yeah.⁴⁸³

One of the principal reasons that these tacit beliefs persisted, and continued to provide parameters for this emerging church, was the community’s leadership. Barbara addressed the impact that Dave and Ethan have had upon *Novitas* when discussing what determined the beliefs of the *Novitas* community. In answering this question, she responded, ‘in theory, the community itself, in reality, the leadership team and / or the denominations.’⁴⁸⁴ Indeed, several interviewees repeated this sentiment, and it found corroboration in the articulations of the community leaders

⁴⁸² Barbara, turn 137.

⁴⁸³ Barbara, turn 147.

⁴⁸⁴ Barbara, turn 137.

themselves, who recognized that their roles as ministers from the *Methodist Church* and the *Church of England* had a profound theological effect upon the community.

In addition to the unspoken limitations detailed above, interviewees also suggested that there were certain views that would not be warmly received by the community. Most notable among these, were views deemed to be discriminatory or disrespectful, and Rebecca captured well the sentiment of many in this community when responding to questions concerning the beliefs that would not be permitted. She remarked, ‘I think sort of like, intolerant ones, where you're abusive. Like racism or whatever for example. I don't think that would be tolerated at all, because it's very much about respecting other people.’⁴⁸⁵ For the *Novitas* community, the notion of respecting and not harming others surfaced as the only criteria for determining whether or not a particular belief would be accepted into the community. Most interviewees indicated though, that those who held these beliefs would be allowed to participate in the life of the community, but other community members would stridently challenge their views. This perspective is illustrated well by Dave’s interview. In a response to the question of what would not be allowed, he noted how the members of his community would doubtlessly choose to resist certain beliefs. After first establishing that, ‘you know, anything's allowed, but things—certain things—would be frowned on quite heavily by the community,’ Dave continued by advising, ‘so if someone came in, you know for example, with a very—obvious example—conservative line on sexuality. That would be challenged by people within the community.’⁴⁸⁶ Additionally, if a person’s behaviour reached a point where it posed harm to the community—that would be grounds for exclusion. Ethan noted several such instances, saying:

In terms of exclusion, we—Dave and I—have sat down with one, maybe two, in the last sort of five years and encouraged them to think why they are a part of the community. We're talking about people who were there for unhealthy reasons, abusing the friendship and welcome that was there, and feeling that we were kind of out of our depth dealing with these people.⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁵ Rebecca, turn 124.

⁴⁸⁶ Dave, turn 134.

⁴⁸⁷ Ethan, turn 30.

When asked to clarify the details of these situations, Ethan would not elaborate due to their pastorally sensitive nature, but stressed how crucial it was to ensure, ‘the care and safety of those people in the community. So anyone who jeopardizes that, or you can see something happening, then you'd want to protect the community from that’.⁴⁸⁸ Thus, while participants with a wide mix of beliefs and perspectives were welcome to take part in this emerging church, the community of *Novitas*, through the process of actively challenging certain beliefs, through limiting harmful behaviour, and through situating their discussions within the broad framework of Christianity, established a set of loosely held criteria that functioned as a potent sieve, regulating the inclusivity of this community.

Eclecticism

A second theme related to *Novitas*’s questioning nature that surfaced during my participation in this community was their propensity towards ecclesial eclecticism. Because of this community’s quest for challenging conversations and inquisitive discussions, all matters of ecclesiastical life remained open for consideration and critique. This openness fostered a sense of experimentation within the community, resulting in a wide appropriation of disparate Christian traditions, and a persistent dialogue about ecclesiological matters.

Through the published literature located in the welcome bag given to first time visitors, as well as through the online material located on the community’s website, *Novitas* steadily highlighted the eclectic appropriation present in this emerging church. In the welcome bag literature the community conveyed how they would ‘draw from a rich vein of Christian tradition across denominations’ to help give shape to their ecclesial life, and the community’s website stressed how, in aiming for holistic worship that would allow for freedom to explore new ways in which to contemplate God, the *Novitas* community would draw upon the diverse resources present in the Christian tradition.⁴⁸⁹ This drawing from a rich vein of Christian tradition manifested itself most clearly through the borrowing and eclectic blending

⁴⁸⁸ Ethan, turn 32.

⁴⁸⁹ See the above sections entitled, *Narration through Initial Worship Gathering* and *Online Space of Novitas* for the details surrounding the welcome bag and the community’s website.

of rituals and practices in the *Novitas* community's worship gatherings. As the above descriptions indicate, rituals selected from various Christian traditions—such as prayers from the *Iona Community*, house blessings from the *Roman Catholic* tradition, Eucharist celebrations flowing from the Anglican or Methodist traditions, recitations of *The Jesus Prayer*, and presentations of the *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*—were eclectically arranged alongside experimental components such as ambient sound, painting, contemplative walking, audio and visual excerpts from contemporary music and film, and sustained theological discussion and debate.

Notably, much of this theological discussion that took place in the community also drew from diverse perspectives within the Christian tradition—adding to the eclectic nature of the worship gatherings by bringing together divergent views for consideration. For instance, in describing the theological discussions that took place at *Novitas*, Diana indicated that topics would range from an exchanging of views on a scriptural text to discussing disputable aspects within Christianity. Providing an example of a conversation such as this, she commented, 'one week we looked at what does communion mean and how high up the candle are you, and what does communion mean to different people from different faith perspectives'.⁴⁹⁰ Although these kinds of discussions continually surfaced as a key ingredient in the *Novitas* gatherings, actual rituals and liturgical activities often supplemented them, offering an element of tangibility for the community's investigative quests. An example of this can be seen in the above description of the *Epiphany* service—where participants explored the celebration of this feast through discussing and then enacting various rituals from different traditions. As a consequence of this pattern though, many of the more visual, iconic and aesthetic elements that were present in the liturgies of *Novitas* received an immoderate amount of verbal explanation from those participating in the worship gathering. Thus, in spite of the eclectic incorporation of these diverse ecclesial traditions, the *Novitas* community remained robustly verbal in their orientation.

⁴⁹⁰ Diana, turn 76.

While the literature and the practices of the *Novitas* community stressed the meaningfulness of appropriating various rituals from diverse Christian traditions, some community participants took a more ambivalent stance towards this practice. For instance, in an interview Kathryn noted how her past encounters with certain rituals had left her numb to the prospects of their incorporation into the liturgies of *Novitas*:

I'm not really into rituals. I think the Methodist church doesn't... well to me it doesn't have many. It has some obviously, but not as much as the Anglican Church. I remember going to a high Anglican church where, you know, a man with a stick walks down the aisle, basically collects a person whose doing a reading, walks them back up, they do the reading, then they walk back down with the Bible and the stick. You know, that kind of ritual, I just think, 'what's all that about?' So, I'm not really into rituals. I like them sometimes, but the trouble with rituals is that when you go over them and over them, they become meaningless. And I always say this about the Lord's Prayer, it doesn't mean much to me anymore because I can say it in my sleep and I don't think about it. You just recite without passion and it just doesn't do anything for you... well, it doesn't do anything for me anyway.⁴⁹¹

Thus, for participants such as Kathryn, this activity of appropriation did not succeed in providing a meaningful experience. Still, the way in which this emerging church borrowed rituals from different Christian traditions, and then eclectically blended them with one another—and with other material drawn from contemporary sources—surfaced as a notable feature in this emerging church.

Missional Focus - Wellingham City Centre

A final theme that surfaced during my time as a participant with the *Novitas* community was their relationship to the city centre of Wellingham. From the emphasis that this location received in the narrations of *Novitas*' formation to its prominent placement on the website and within the weekly ministerial practices of the community, the city centre of Wellingham occupied a notable portion of the community's attention. In fact, when participants spoke of 'missional' engagement, they would frequently refer to the hope of rooting the practices of their church in the

⁴⁹¹ Kathryn, turn 106.

city centre.⁴⁹² For instance, Rebecca, when asked in an interview to describe what she thought missional meant to those who belong to *Novitas*, responded, ‘I think they're very much about engaging with sort of the city centre and surroundings, and people kind of living and working in that area’.⁴⁹³ While the *Fulcrum Café* was intended to be the key outworking of the *Novitas* community’s missional efforts in the city centre, this relationship lacked a degree of authenticity because of the disconnect that existed between these two communities. Indeed, Rebecca, after noting the expressed value of engagement with the city centre that she often heard at *Novitas*, said this:

While they have this whole engaging the culture and the world around them, and the city centre and the world around them, I don't see them actually doing it very much now. We're kind of downstairs in that building, and yet I've not seen a lot of involvement with the world outside.⁴⁹⁴

Even so, this disconnect between the communities of *Novitas* and *Fulcrum Café* seems to be widely recognized in both circles and addressing this dissonance factored heavily into decisions surrounding the future of the community—most notably, the hiring of a new community leader who would help bring these two groups within closer proximity to one another.

Another crucial aspect to *Novitas*’ missional engagement was the way in which this emerging church spoke of its relationship to the city centre. When addressing the relationship between the *Novitas* community and wider human society, Dave shared these comments:

Novitas has a positive relationship with the world. If there was a line—you know, a syncretism / dualism line—we’d be more on the... closer to the syncretism end. Not that we want to be syncretistic, but on that spectrum we'll be closer there because we affirm that God is living and active and present in the world. The world is seen as a positive place, a place to engage with, and a place to affirm—which I

⁴⁹² In my earliest encounters with this emerging church, the nomenclature ‘missional’ began to materialize as a formative idiom in the shaping of community identity. From the noticeable placement of this term on their website to the ubiquitous manner in which it was adjectively employed to describe the community’s activities, those participating in *Novitas* repeatedly drew upon missional as a foundational descriptor.

⁴⁹³ Rebecca, turn 136.

⁴⁹⁴ Rebecca, turn 138.

rejoice in because I want to say that world is a good place rather than... you know, bad, bad, bad things happen, but that doesn't mean the whole of creation is tarnished—is a bad place.⁴⁹⁵

This positive stance towards the created world and human society brought with it a heightened sensitivity to the city centre culture for the *Novitas* community. Thus, when designing their liturgies, certain rituals they considered culturally irrelevant were avoided. For instance, since the participants of *Novitas* believed congregational singing represented a form of Christian worship that held little relevance for their local culture, this emerging church chose not to include this practice in their liturgies.⁴⁹⁶ By opting instead for practices deemed more culturally appropriate for their city centre context—such as excerpts from contemporary films and music—*Novitas* insisted on being a community that would not shun or ignore the wider human society.

Yet, despite *Novitas*' positive stance towards the Wellingham city centre, there also remained strong aspirations within this emerging church to represent a counter-cultural community. Again, Dave's comments are illustrative: 'the church is a counter-cultural community... I warm to that'.⁴⁹⁷ Putting into words the attitudes of a number of the *Novitas* participants, he continued by sharing a particular conception of church that they pursue:

The church as an alternative society which models something different. The church as an alternative community which challenges a dominant consciousness of that which is around it. Aspirationally, I would like *Novitas* to do that, but whether it does or not—well I'm sure at times it doesn't.⁴⁹⁸

While this concern of Dave's may have a measure of merit to it, there were in fact instances that I observed where his aspirations for his community were realized. Indeed, the art exhibition that took place in the *Fulcrum Café*—which focused particularly on the themes of solitude in a public space—stands as a good example. Through this performance, *Novitas* sought to prophetically question the isolated

⁴⁹⁵ Dave, turn 152.

⁴⁹⁶ As noted in the above section on Inclusivity, additional reasons for not including congregational singing were also given.

⁴⁹⁷ Dave, turn 90.

⁴⁹⁸ Dave, turn 90.

existence associated with city centre culture. For Dave and others this forty-day exhibition exemplified what it might mean for their church to exist as alternative community challenging a dominant consciousness. Even so, the fact that *Novitas* embodied this challenge through an art exhibition that drew upon the work of nearby artists and members of the public reveals their desire to foster a positive relationship with their local culture and the wider society.

Focus Group Summary and Validation

At the conclusion of my stint in the field, and after transcribing and analysing the interviews from *Novitas*, I returned to Wellingham in order to facilitate a focus group with six of the community participants. This afforded me the opportunity to feed back to the community what I observed and heard in my time there and during my interviews, validating and qualifying the findings above. I have arranged the material below to reflect the original focus group schedule.⁴⁹⁹ I first highlight the most striking features of this community, and then I recount the various themes that arose out of observations and interviews. Finally I conclude with an initial attempt at ecclesiologically locating the *Novitas* community. The format of the focus group was such that I would communicate a particular theme or feature that emerged from my fieldwork, followed by the question, ‘Is this an authentic description of your community?’ From there the participants were encouraged to agree, disagree, add their own observation, discuss it with one another, or ask their own question about the data. At times, I too would include a follow-up question of my own for discussion. In each of the following instances, the focus group respondents indicated that this was indeed an authentic description of *Novitas*. Where their discussions of the findings provided a degree of helpful nuance, I have accounted for this in the analysis section (section three) of the thesis.

The Most Striking Features of the *Novitas* Community

(1) The Questioning Community: When I contemplated my experiences at *Novitas*, the portrayal that defined this community more than any other was that it existed as a space for faith inquiry and theological exploration. This manifested itself with reoccurring themes of doubt alongside faith, questioning inherited beliefs, seeking to

⁴⁹⁹ The focus group schedule appears unedited and in its entirety in Appendix K.

understand other traditions, rethinking ‘church’ for a city centre context and creating a safe place to work through individual crises of faith. When asked, ‘what does this community value?’, most interview participants spoke—at least in part—of a place where discussion is encouraged and questions are welcomed. My initial reflection of my times on Wednesday nights was that it reminded me more of a postgraduate seminar or R.E. course than it did a worshipping faith community. Other community phenomena related to this feature of questioning are a more egalitarian ethos—where any and all can contribute—and a playful irreverence towards many ‘church’ norms.

(2) The *Novitas* / *Fulcrum Café* Dynamic: The other feature that I found incredibly striking was the relationship between *Novitas* and *Fulcrum Café*. Perhaps it was an assumption I made prior to joining this community, but I had envisioned a much closer relationship between the two entities. However, upon arriving I quickly realized that there were two very distinct communities, connected only through a shared physical space, and perhaps through leadership figures such as Ethan and Dave. This disconnect between *Novitas* and *Fulcrum Café* seemed to be widely recognized in the community and addressing this disconnect factored heavily into decisions surrounding the future of the community—most notably, the hiring of a new community leader who would oversee both entities. The establishment of *TRIP*, a *Novitas* led initiative that organized the ‘solitude in a public space’ art exhibition, was also an attempt to address this disconnect.

Themes that Emerged from my Participation in *Novitas*

(1) Wednesday Night Gatherings: The gathering on Wednesday nights was an important aspect in the life of *Novitas*. While it was not critical (or common) for an individual to attend every week, it did seem to be significant in defining participation in the life of the community. It appeared to me to be the primary place for the community’s theological processing and probing. The lighting of the candles seemed to mark off a sacred time when the community gathered in the name of the triune God. Singing did not take place during this time. Corporate singing was seen to be culturally irrelevant and a form of faith confession that may be inappropriate for the beliefs of the community. The space was set up in a café style, which fostered a decentred atmosphere and helped to facilitate discussion. In this setting all presumably had equal say in the conversation and a single ‘talking head’ did not

dominate the time. While the gathering was important, ‘church’ is not confined to this space and may also be lived out in places like pubs, flats, work, etc.

(2) Missional Participation in Wellingham: Another theme that emerged was the desire for missional participation in Wellingham. The city centre culture was an important theme here, and this community evidenced a deep affection for the Wellingham city centre. In general, there was a two-fold stance in regards to the city centre culture. First, there was a desire to have a space to engage with spiritual matters in a form that was rooted in the culture and not alien to the life of someone who lived and worked in this context. Therefore during the corporate gatherings, *Novitas* strived to creatively engage matters of spirituality through culturally relevant apparatus such as film, music, art, etc. Second, there was a desire to be a spiritual presence in the city centre. Activities such as the ‘solitude in a public space’ and the *Fulcrum* night café, where mission took the form of presence, welcome and hospitality, are good examples of this.

(3) An Ethos of Inclusively: The *Novitas* community strived to be a welcoming and inclusive community. Participation and inclusion in the community was open to all regardless of one’s faith persuasion, doctrinal beliefs or sexuality—to name but a few examples. Although no one would have been excluded from participating in the community based upon who they were or what they believed, destructive behaviour that was harmful to the community could have been a reason for exclusion. Interviewees also suggested that others—particularly those who found themselves out of step with the inclusive and welcoming ethos of *Novitas*—might choose to self-exclude.

Ecclesiological Locating the *Novitas* Community.

(1) Anglican-Methodist partnership and *Fresh Expressions*: Although *Novitas* predated the Anglican-Methodist *Fresh Expressions* initiative, it currently exists under the auspices of those sponsoring churches. As such, *Novitas* conceived of itself as being rooted in the wider church and the wider Christian tradition—although one did not need to adhere to any Anglican or Methodist affirmations or practices to be a part of *Novitas*. Because of this affiliation, theological differences between the

church's paid leadership and the participants seemed to surface when the community began to tread into matters that were of ecclesiological import—for instance, ordination, Eucharist celebration and baptism. I got the sense that the participants were more willing to rethink and reinvent those practices than the church's paid leadership. Also, a notable number of folks from *Novitas* that I met and interviewed had some prior exposure to the evangelical wings of these churches. Consequently, many *Novitas* participants were both shaped by, and reacting to, their experience in these evangelical expressions of church.

(2) Verbal Orientation vs. Visual Orientation: If a rough spectrum were to be created, and one end was designated 'catholic' and the other 'protestant', one could map where a community might fall on that spectrum through a number of factors. The one I wish to consider at this point is whether a community is verbally oriented (including spoken word and written text) or visually oriented. On this spectrum, the more visually oriented a community was, the more 'catholic' it would appear; the more verbally oriented a community was, the more 'protestant' it would appear. When considering *Novitas*, I saw a mixture of verbal and visual practices. Indeed it appeared to be significantly more visual than the 'typical' protestant community. Nevertheless, the verbal orientation still dominated much of the meaning making that took place in the community—particularly as participants processed their faith and theological understandings, they did so through dialogue and discussion.

(3) A penchant for ecclesial eclecticism: A number of the interviewees—particularly those who had been with the community for a longer period—suggested that *Novitas* was not doing anything that was necessarily radical or unique, but was simply trying to be faithful to their own local context, just as the church has attempted to do for centuries. I found this assessment compelling and would agree that much of what was taking place in this community could find parallel in other Christian communities across the globe and throughout history. Yet, what I did think was unique about this community was the way in which *Novitas* eclectically blended various traditions, beliefs and practices in order to shape something that was in fact distinct from other ecclesial traditions.

Chapter 5: Depiction of *Common Table*

In this chapter I present a detailed portrayal of the *Common Table* community based upon the observations made during my time as a participant with this emerging church and upon the data generated through the in-depth interviews I conducted with various community members. This portrayal describes *Common Table's* ecclesial contexts and historical development, its weekly patterns, its physical spaces, its worship gatherings, the profiles and personal narratives of its participants, and the community's core practices.

Overview of the *Common Table* Community

This initial section of the chapter follows a structure similar to the previous chapter's overview of the *Novitas* community by first narrating through the formation and development of *Common Table*, and then describing the weekly rhythms, physical and online spaces, and communal practices of this community. This section of the chapter also provides an introduction to particular individuals who have aligned themselves with the *Common Table* community. As with the overview of *Novitas*, the particulars surrounding the early life and growth of the *Common Table* community lie outside the parameters of my own empirical research into this emerging church, and as such I am required to rely upon the perspectives of those interviewed and other written accounts in order to shape this narrative.

The Ecclesial Context of *Common Table* – History and Development

Providing an account of the history and development of the *Common Table* Community requires a brief excursion into the identity and makeup of *Shelbyville Community Church*—as this is the congregation from which a core group of *Common Table* participants emerged. Although currently a large non-denominational church with over a thousand participants, *Shelbyville Community Church* began as a small congregation of approximately twenty people in 1970. Most of the early participants in this church were students and faculty at a nearby university—where they initially meet in one of the buildings on the campus. Coming together around the shared values of ‘biblical teaching’ and living ‘Christian lifestyles’, the church grew quickly and soon moved into a purpose-built facility located just off the university campus. This location would house the congregation until 2001, when they moved into a larger facility located on the border between the

towns of Shelbyville and Springfield. Since these two towns each have a sizable university located within their borders, the demographics of Shelbyville and Springfield are reflected in the makeup of *Shelbyville Community Church*—which is a highly educated, multi-national, and multi-racial community. Ecclesiologically, the *Shelbyville Community Church* is located within the evangelical tradition, and describes itself as ‘a diverse group of people who love Jesus Christ and His gospel, who want to be under the authority of Scripture, and who deeply desire Jesus to be known in our city and the world’. As a non-denominational church, they are congregational in their polity. While their worship services contain music, scripture readings, and prayers, the focus of their liturgy is ‘the preaching of the Bible’. This aspect of the service is seen as the culmination of their worship.

By the mid 1980s, *Shelbyville Community Church* had grown into one of the better-attended churches in the local area. The large number of university students who began attending the congregation in 1970s and early 1980s were developing into a sizable collection of young families. In 1990 the congregation hired Mike, a youth minister from a large church in the north-eastern United States, to begin leading a small youth ministry for the teenagers participating in the Shelbyville congregation. As a co-pastor for *Shelbyville Community Church*, Mike’s responsibilities would evolve over his fifteen-year stint with this church to include overseeing the collegiate ministry and the young adult’s ministry. By the late 1990s, Mike had become significantly involved with the group of prominent evangelical youth leaders that would later go on to form *Emergent Village*.⁵⁰⁰ He explains how his involvement in this organization was spurred on by questions that were surfacing in the *Shelbyville Community Church*. Mike remarks how the conversation around postmodernity, which fuelled many of the early discussions in *Emergent Village*, were also appearing in his local congregation, saying:

Well, in terms of in the nineties, when I was really getting going in *Emergent Village*—reading and exploring—I was in a role at my church where this was partly relevant because we're in a college town. So, I mean, there were people in our church who were talking postmodernity and deconstruction and all sorts of things as a part of their normal academic pursuits, so it wasn't entirely off the map to be interested in those issues. And there was some relevance to our

⁵⁰⁰ For a description of this group and its evolution into *Emergent Village*, see chapter three.

church—also some strong pushback—but there were people... some of our church's mission was enhanced by that sensitivity. So I was both leading and cajoling and fighting during those times.⁵⁰¹

As a result of Mike's leading and cajoling—and as a result of the congregation's enhanced sensitivity to the postmodern climate—momentum began building in the early 2000s for an 'emerging' ministry initiative at *Shelbyville Community Church*. Through Mike's involvement, a 'young adults ministry' was formed in this congregation, with the aim of increasing social justice initiatives, developing local ministry partnerships, and deepening community life amongst this demographic. Alongside the development of this young adults ministry, a distinct worship service at *Shelbyville Community Church* was also initiated. While this service was open to all of the participants in the congregation, the younger adults in the congregation were the primary attenders. Heather, a *Common Table* participant who was a part of *Shelbyville Community Church* at this time, saw this worship service as a precursor to the worship service of *Common Table*. She notes that it was a place for experimentation and 'using the space there a little bit differently, and trying out some of these ideas'—ideas such as the use of candles for creating sacred space.⁵⁰²

As momentum gathered around the young adult ministry and newly developed worship service, questions arose about the future of this emerging initiative and its relationship to *Shelbyville Community Church*. Mike remarked, 'we originally had ambivalence as to whether [this emerging initiative] was going to be a church plant'.⁵⁰³ According to him, instead of an emerging church, *Common Table* could have existed as an 'intentional community' within the wider *Shelbyville Community Church* congregation. Indeed, as Heather recalled, when discussing the future of the community that was forming around this emerging initiative, 'the first thing we could all agree on is we didn't necessarily want to start a church plant'.⁵⁰⁴ She explains that they 'were looking more at that idea of a church within a church', because 'all of us were a part of *Shelbyville Community Church*, we liked [this church] and didn't feel like we needed to change something, but kind of work within something to bring

⁵⁰¹ Mike, interview by author, Springfield, 16 July 2009, Mike transcript, turn 34.

⁵⁰² Heather, interview by author, Springfield, 16 July 2009, Heather transcript, turn 14.

⁵⁰³ Mike, turn 60.

⁵⁰⁴ Heather, turn 10.

about some change'.⁵⁰⁵ Yet, as the community that gathered around the emerging ministry initiative began to solidify, gaps between this group and the wider congregation began to develop. According to Heather, early conversations about emerging initiatives included discussions about avoiding a situation where *Shelbyville Community Church* morphed into two distinct churches, 'that shared the same space, but didn't really... you know, the people didn't know each other'.⁵⁰⁶ But, as she described it, 'things just kind of melded and transformed, and I think that it became clear though after a while that [the emerging initiative] was that separate church anyway'.⁵⁰⁷

Not only were gaps beginning to form between those participating in these two communities, but Mike was also noticing a large gap between himself and the *Shelbyville Community Church* congregation that he was co-leading. Suggesting that there was a widening distance between his vision for a church's engagement with postmodern culture, and the vision of the *Shelbyville Community Church* congregation, Mike said, 'I definitely got in that space where I was a good bit further ahead of the congregation I was leading'.⁵⁰⁸ Because Mike believed that 'disappointment' existed in the gap between leader and those led, and because this 'distance of disappointment' had grown substantially between himself and the congregation of *Shelbyville Community Church*, he recognized that 'it was time to leave' and to pursue the vision of developing a distinct emerging community.⁵⁰⁹ Thus, with the endorsement and financial support of *Shelbyville Community Church*, the conceptual work for the emerging community that would become *Common Table* began in January 2005. A small group of participants would begin meeting in the neighbouring town of Springfield—in the living room of one of the principal families—later that year.

⁵⁰⁵ Heather, turn 12.

⁵⁰⁶ Heather, turn 12.

⁵⁰⁷ Heather, turn 14.

⁵⁰⁸ Mike, turn 34.

⁵⁰⁹ Mike, turn 34.

Heather describes these early meetings, saying, ‘when we started, we met in [this family’s] living room and there was no music, and there were about twenty people’—all of whom had come from the *Shelbyville Community Church* congregation.⁵¹⁰ According to her, the majority of the time was spent ‘sitting in the circle’ and ‘just talking’. Noting how Mike and a former member of the community, ‘would take turns leading a discussion’ in these initial gatherings, Heather explained that the participants realized fairly quickly that music was an important liturgical element missing from their gatherings.⁵¹¹ As the community’s liturgy developed, music was not only introduced into the gathering, but would evolve to become a dominant feature.⁵¹² Yet, the addition of music to the community’s worship gatherings was not the only development that occurred in those early days *Common Table*’s existence. Indeed, the make-up of the community itself changed significantly during the first few months. The following paragraphs describe these developments.

Since there was an initial ambivalence as to whether or not the emerging initiative in *Shelbyville Community Church* would become an actual church or simply an intentional community, the participants met on Sunday nights because, as Mike expressed it, ‘we didn’t want to compete with the church that people were in’.⁵¹³ Yet, when formally moving forward as an emerging church plant, the *Common Table* community decided to keep Sunday evenings as the time set aside for their weekly gatherings. Mike suggested that this was done partly out of an ‘interest in having a non-traditional time for church’, and partly out of pragmatic concerns about finding a space for gathering.⁵¹⁴ The community’s assumption was that it would be easier to secure a future worship space on Sunday evenings, rather than Sunday mornings. This meant that many of the early participants emerging from *Shelbyville Community Church* could participate in both communities. One such participant was Kimberly, who, after noting how these initial living room meetings were populated primarily by

⁵¹⁰ Heather, turn 48.

⁵¹¹ Heather, turn 50.

⁵¹² I discuss the role that music plays in the *Common Table* worship gatherings in the below section entitled, ‘Liturgical Elements in Worship’.

⁵¹³ Mike, turn 60.

⁵¹⁴ Mike, turn 60.

Shelbyville Community Church participants, remarked, ‘almost everybody who came from [this church] had to make a decision like I did at some point—“am I going to continue to go to two churches, or am I going to commit to one or the other”?’⁵¹⁵

Within the first six months, most of the participants involved in both communities had made the decision to commit to one or the other. While Kimberly decided to align herself with *Common Table*, a significant number of other participants chose to return to *Shelbyville Community Church*. Mike details this period of *Common Table*’s development, noting:

We got younger six months in. We actually started heavy in our mid-thirties with kids, and I think most of the people in that... part of it is they weren't fully committed to the model, but also the siren song of highly developed children's programs and the convenience of the ‘program church’ was really hard for that age group to do. One of their struggle points is that they were doing two churches at the same time—and one was easy and one was harder. And they—most of them—chose the easy, or they had a spouse who didn't buy into the theology or the tone. So we had people like that as well. So we got younger really fast and so that kind of marked us as young, and then you come into the community and realize, ‘wow, this is a young community’.⁵¹⁶

These early developments were the first of many for the *Common Table* community, and Mike noted that the community ‘changed radically from year to year, with one pretty violent change from year one to year two, which caused some issues’.⁵¹⁷ During this first year of development, the community moved their weekly gatherings from the living room of one of the principal families, into a loft space above a coffee shop in Springfield. The coffee shop was located close to the university in Springfield, and the community experienced a noticeable influx of students—many of who did not have a previous connection to *Shelbyville Community Church*. Although *Common Table* would move their worship gathering to a storefront space in downtown Springfield a couple of years later, the composition of the community

⁵¹⁵ Kimberly, interview by author, Springfield, 27 July 2009, Kimberly transcript, turn 58.

⁵¹⁶ Mike, turn 58.

⁵¹⁷ Mike, turn 64.

would remain substantially allied with this, and other, local universities. In fact, during my participation with *Common Table*, their weekly gatherings experienced a participation flux from approximately forty to fifty individuals in the summer months to over eighty participants during the school term. Also during my participation with *Common Table*, the community once again moved their weekly gathering to a different space on the opposite side of downtown Springfield. While Mike noted that moves such as these ‘took a lot of energy’ and ‘cost us some missional energy’, this was not the primary reason he gave for the radical change in the community from year one to year two.⁵¹⁸ Mike’s description of this transition provides excellent insight into the ways in which *Common Table* developed:

Year one, our first kind of growth, was some people who were more counter-cultural, which was exciting—the type of people that we wanted in the community. We had some traditions that developed that were deeply loved. Film night, an art night where people would gather and read and work on projects, paint, drink wine, and do those things. A lot of these things came from [my partner]. [She] was the one who drove most of those things, and a couple of missional traditions like field gleaning and things like that. Between year one and year two, a lot of those disappeared to the grave disappointment of the people who loved them. What was missing was... there was some immaturity. There were folks that expected it to be done for them, and when [my partner] was changing her area of emphasis she really asked people to take these on, and they agreed to but they didn’t. I mean they really expected it to be done for them. So that was a really painful shift with people who got fairly disappointed with the church and we had a small group largely disappear in the wake of that, without our really understanding that it was happening. So that kind of much more creative dimension was a big change.⁵¹⁹

In the wake of the sizable changes that occurred from the first year to the second, several features gradually developed in the community that helped give shape to the current makeup of *Common Table*. First, the community became more intentional about establishing a ‘lead team’. According to Mike, in the initial stages of development, any individual who was ‘interested and willing’ could assume responsibility in an area of the church’s life—even if they were ‘not capable’ or they

⁵¹⁸ Mike, turn 64.

⁵¹⁹ Mike, turn 64.

were ‘impossible to work with’.⁵²⁰ As this emerging church matured, it was important to have a community of people sharing responsibility for the various areas of the church’s life, and thus, those individuals who ‘could only work their way’ left during this transition—leaving a group of ‘people who were highly committed to the community, who were not transitional, and were people who had a measure of wisdom’ to function as a ‘lead team’ for the church.⁵²¹ In addition to the development of a lead team, the *Common Table* community began to focus more of their energies around the structure of their worship. According to Mike, this community ‘became more liturgical somewhere between year one and year two’.⁵²² This aspect of the community’s life is explored in more detail in the below sections describing the *Common Table* worship gathering, but it is important to note at this point that Joshua, an accomplished musician, began participating with the community during this stage. He was highly influential in the liturgical development of the community, and by the time I began participating with the community, Joshua was receiving a stipend for his contribution. A final development in the community, which helped give shape to the current makeup of *Common Table*, was their engagement with a local grassroots economic and political advocacy organization called *Our City Care*. As I conveyed earlier, the *Common Table* community expended a notable amount of energy in relocating from one worship space to another, and thus in the process, they lost a measure of missional energy. As a result, several of the community’s local initiatives had lapsed. Instead of starting new initiatives, *Common Table* chose to align themselves in partnership with organizations already involved with programs that engaged the Springfield community. *Our City Care* was one such organization, and the *Common Table* community had solidified their association with this organization in the years leading up to my involvement.

The Principal Patterns of the *Common Table* Community

Although the *Common Table* community was only four years old when I began participating in 2009, the weekly rhythms and collective practices of this emerging church followed a well-established pattern. In this portion of the chapter I offer an

⁵²⁰ Mike, turn 100.

⁵²¹ Mike, turn 100.

⁵²² Mike, turn 100.

overview of the various activities that took place during my time with this community.

Initial Overview of the Weekly Rhythms of the Community

The nucleus of *Common Table* was their weekly Sunday evening gathering, and through the liturgical structure of this time a notable emphasis was placed upon the celebration of the Eucharist. In fact, this ritual rested at the centre of ecclesial life for many of the participants of this emerging church. While the Eucharist is a central feature for many ecclesial communities, the manner in which the ritual was enacted in this emerging church was highly unique, and therefore I give it considerable attention in the below section describing *Common Table's* worship gathering.

Most Sunday evenings followed a set liturgical pattern drawn together from a variety of ecclesiastical sources, with the formal gathering unfolding in nine movements— (1) A call to gather, (2) greeting, (3) preparation, (4) scripture reading, (5) conversation, (6) confession, (7) absolution, (8) the Eucharist celebration, and (9) benediction. With the exception of the greeting, scripture reading and weekly conversation, which were all spoken, musical performers would guide the participants through the liturgy via carefully selected songs that epitomized the various movements.

In addition to the Sunday worship gathering where the Eucharist celebration occurred, there were smaller groups that participants were encouraged to contribute to throughout the week. These ranged from more recognizable 'home groups', where community members met together for a meal, prayer and scripture discussions, to the weekly 'pub group', where participants gathered over pints at a local tavern for a lively discussion of a pre-circulated academic article. Local community engagement was also a strong value for those participating in *Common Table*, and partnering with organizations that were already undertaking community work was the approach preferred over starting new initiatives within the church. This local involvement had seen an array of expression since 2005, but during my time with the community many of the participants were actively engaged with the

work of *Our City Care*—a grassroots economic and political advocacy organization focused on current needs in the local community.

Physical Space of *Common Table*

As noted in the above history and development section, the *Common Table* community relocated their offices and weekly meeting space to a different venue during the time in which I was participating. Since two different buildings housed the community gatherings during my research stint, I describe each one separately here, drawing brief attention to a limited number of crucial differences between the two locations.

'Rue Street' Space

Situated on the ground floor of a two-story tan brick building, the Rue Street space served as the worship and office site for the *Common Table* community during the majority of my participation with this emerging church. Originally built for commercial use, this structure sits alongside similar buildings dotting the eastside of downtown Springfield. While the current owners of the building have renovated the first floor for their own residential use, the ground floor remains in its commercial state, with large green and white trimmed storefront windows facing the adjacent street and sidewalk. Behind one portion of these street-facing windows lies the main gathering space of the *Common Table* community. The offices of the church exist behind the other set of windows, but a curtain has been erected on the inside, turning this portion into a small display room where a pewter chalice and a loaf of bread sit alongside decorative cast iron crosses and candles on a narrow wooden table. A sizeable art collage rests on an easel next to a smaller framed sign that sits on the end of the wooden table and gives details about the Sunday night gathering. White lettered signage affixed to the storefront windows of the main area also serves to identify this space as belonging to the *Common Table* community.

A glass door located at the centre of the windows gives access to the building—opening immediately into the main gathering space. This wood floored room is rectangular in shape with a high, decoratively embossed ceiling and two long, bright white walls leading towards a purple accent wall at the far end. A previously used staircase still rises from the floor on one of the long walls, ending abruptly once it

reaches the ceiling. A door leading to the remainder of the ground floor area lies at the centre of the other long wall. Through this entrance, there is a small hall that hosts the snack table and grants access to the toilets, an office and a medium sized room used to house the children's activities. Natural light fills the main space from the glass front and two tall windows located on the back wall. Pendant lights covered with oversized round paper shades hang from the ceiling, offering incandescent illumination to the room during the night hours. The walls are modestly adorned with ecclesiastically themed photo collages, paintings, cast iron crosses and a black lettered stencil that reads, 'Lord, hear our prayer'.

The hosting of the Sunday night gathering of *Common Table* remains the primary purpose for this space, and during my participation with this emerging church, no other community event or activity took place in this venue. The main room is primarily furnished with black low profiled couches and red cushioned wooden chairs, with an occasional grey cushioned high back chair accenting the mix. An assortment of end tables and coffee tables also fill the space, allowing for lamps, candles and other decorative items to be placed about the room. Finally, two larger dark stained wooden tables also appear in this arrangement, serving as communion stations during the celebration of the Eucharist.

Immediately on the inside of the glass door leading from the sidewalk to the worship area, a number of couches, chairs and tables are casually arranged to resemble a small living room or den space. Plants and lamps help to authenticate this replication, and many of the community participants will stop to greet and visit with one another here after walking into the venue. Situated just beyond this initial setting lies the primary arrangement of chairs and tables. Set up 'in the round', two to four rows of chairs border a central 'stage' area on three sides, with one of the long walls serving as the backdrop. In this central area, a couple of stools for the service leaders and an assortment of instruments for the musicians furnish the stage, making it the focal point for an extended portion of the gathering. A small sound system also rests in the centre of the room, amplifying the voices and musical instruments throughout the entire space. Finally, due to the narrow confines of the venue, the communion tables are located outside of this central area on either side of the long room. Thus, during the enactment of the Eucharist, participants will turn their focus away from

the stage and move towards the extremities of the space where they will participate in the table ritual and mingle with one another until the gathering has been concluded.

'Horizons Centre' Space

During the final three weeks of my participation with *Common Table*, the community relocated their offices and gathering space to a different facility in the city of Springfield. Situated in a gentrified residential district, directly northwest of downtown, this property was originally constructed as a Missionary Alliance Church, but it is currently being occupied by an inter-church youth organization committed to ministering to local disenfranchised and marginalized adolescents. This organization was already subletting the worship and classroom space to a small Baptist Church for their use on Sunday mornings, and in the middle of July 2009, they began leasing it to the *Common Table* community for their Sunday evening gatherings. Although located less than a mile from the community's former meeting place on Rue Street, this red-bricked building, with its ecclesiastical design and its leafy neighbourhood setting, provided a marked contrast to their downtown home. The increased square footage of the new space further distinguished this facility from the older one, and the additional classroom space for children and the larger dimensions of the main gathering area made this move an attractive opportunity for the community.

With the exception of making use of a one-room office upstairs, the only time the *Common Table* participants engage with this building as their own space is on Sunday evenings. Therefore a more extensive preparation process occurs before and after the use of the rooms, and there are no permanent fixtures or decorations to indicate that this space belongs to the community. On a Sunday evening, however, there is a small, cloth covered table that sits outside the primary entrance to the gathering space, and on it rests the pewter chalice, loaf of bread, and framed collage from the display window in their previous location. Also on this stand, a large leather bound bible lays opened to a chapter in the Psalms. Beyond the table, two large wooden doors grant access into the church, leading first into a tiny square shaped entrance hall that contains an office desk and computer—presumably serving as a reception area for the youth organization that utilizes the space during the week. Beyond this entrance hall is the main gathering space for the community. Clearly,

this sizeable auditorium, with its high ceiling, rectangular shape, wooden flooring, proscenium stage and baptismal pool, served as the primary worship area for the church that originally occupied this building. The pastel green paint and decorative cream coloured trimming mixes well with the incandescent illumination generated by the sconce lights that line the two longer walls, giving the room a bright and warm ambience. During the daylight hours, sunlight also fills the room from the collection of large windows that are closely spaced across one of the long exterior walls, adding to the warmth and brightness. Two passageways, set to either side of the stage, lead from the main gathering space into the primary corridor that serves to connect the various classrooms, offices, kitchen facilities and toilets that make up this building.

Even though the furnishings and decorations in the new space were the same ones used for the Rue Street facilities, their arrangement was altered slightly because of the additional square footage at the Horizons Centre. Choosing to ignore the large proscenium stage at the far end of the room, the *Common Table* community continued their practice of meeting ‘in the round’. Yet, instead of only three sections of chairs bordering a central area, the new venue allowed space for a fourth flank of chairs to be included—resulting in an entirely surrounded centre ‘stage’. Two other amendments to this arrangement are also worthy of mention. First, the couches, chairs and tables that originally served to create a living room setting in the entrance area of the previous facility were incorporated into the primary arrangement of chairs bordering the area of central focus. This mixed grouping gives ‘the round’ a more casual ambience, with lamps, candles, pictures and plants bringing a living room aura to the entire worship experience. Second—and perhaps even more significant—the communion tables are now moved into the central area as well, bringing the Eucharistic elements into the community’s focus for the entire liturgical encounter.

In all likelihood, the *Common Table* community will continue to experiment with this new space, and the arrangements I described are sure to be altered as the participants settle into the venue and make it their new home. Indeed, many of the community members spoke of the potential for liturgical experimentation that accompanied this move.

Online Space of *Common Table*

The *Common Table* community also occupied space in the digital realm of the online world. Through their website, this emerging church described themselves to site visitors—expressing their values and highlighting their practices. During my participation with the *Common Table* community, the website was rudimentary in its design, and predominately text based. Since my time with this emerging church, they have launched a more developed website that better captures the character of the *Common Table* community. For instance, the new site includes a number of images that depict the aesthetics of the community's worship space and the background colour of the site changes in keeping with the liturgical season. Still, since this portrait of *Common Table* is intended to reflect the community during the time in which I was involved as a participant observer, the following description outlines the rudimentary version of the site.

As already noted, the *Common Table* website was primarily text based. This feature, along with the site's white backdrop and the use of the homepage to provide community updates and to make announcements about future gatherings, made the website appear more like a weblog. Upon navigating to the site, the initial page at which a user arrives is the welcome page. The header on this welcome page, which remains consistent across all the pages on the site, is a large font text reading, '*Common Table* – Emerging Church serving Springfield, US'. Immediately below this header are hypertext links that direct users to the other pages on the *Common Table* website. These subpages are entitled, 'Home', 'Community', 'Worship', 'Mission', and 'FAQs'. Like the header, these hypertext links remain consistent across all the pages on the site. Another consistent feature across all the pages was a text based bar descending along the left side of the page. The text in this bar alerted users to the number of people currently online, provided a link to a weekly newsletter (along with an opportunity signup to receive this update via email), and a place to make a donation to the *Common Table* community via *PayPal* services.

In addition to being the landing page for the website and providing details about the time and location of the weekly worship gathering, this welcome page also gives an introductory description of the *Common Table* community. The text on this page

declares that this emerging church is committed to Jesus' mandate to love others as one loves her or his own self. This description continues by stating that the *Common Table* community seeks to deepen friendships with one another and to look outside themselves and build relationships within the city of Springfield—in the aim of being instruments of healing wherever discord, damage, or neglect has occurred. The closing sentences on this welcome page state that *Common Table* participants themselves are damaged, and therefore pursue the healing grace of Jesus Christ. Thus, instead of claiming to 'have answers', this emerging community seeks to listen and learn from the unique experiences of others.

Many of the other pages on the website—including the home, community, and worship pages—were primarily informational in nature. These pages provided visitors with pertinent details concerning upcoming gatherings and contact information for the community members responsible for aspects such as pastoral care, worship, children's activities, finances, and home groups. They also indicated the times and locations of the various weekly activities that took place outside the worship gathering—such as home groups and pub group. Additionally, weekly podcasts of the worship gatherings were uploaded and made available on the site's worship page. The community page also included a weblog, but this was not active during my participation with *Common Table*.

Two other pages on the *Common Table* website provide helpful insight into the aspirations of this community. The first page, entitled 'mission @ *Common Table*', states that mission guides this community's formation and defines the soul of *Common Table*. Following a paragraph that introduces the phrase 'missional church'—which conveys how this term describes a community that seeks to discern and participate in God's agenda—the text on this page outlines the missional 'passions' of this emerging church. These passions include breaking free of the notion that 'mission' is to be understood solely as evangelism in international settings—to be carried out by highly trained professional missionaries. Instead, this webpage suggests that mission should be understood as a way of life for all those who follow the path of Christ, regardless of context or locality. These passions also include valuing God's present kingdom as much as God's eternal kingdom—seeking to embody the spirit of God's kingdom in the present context. Finally, this page

states that *Common Table*'s missional passions include a desire to extend their cultural frame of reference beyond the perspective of 'affluent, western culture', and to listen and learn from other cultures and communities. These desires drive the Common Table community to seek diversity in their ministry partnerships, as they come near to those in different contexts as 'learners' rather than 'problem-solvers'.

A second page on the website that provides helpful insight into the aspirations of this emerging community is the FAQs page. Indeed, a fuller understanding of the *Common Table* community emerges through their responses to questions about what this community believes, what denomination they affiliate with, and what their weekly worship gatherings are like. In answering the question of what this community believes, the text on this webpage indicates that *Common Table* is committed to 'living in the way of Jesus' and to the worship of God as Father, Son, and Spirit. The response to this question continues to state that scripture, the individual and corporate experiences of the community, and the history and narrative of the church compels the community in this direction. In recognition of the relationship this community shares with the historical church, the response concludes by indicating that the community upholds the beliefs of Christianity as expressed in the *Apostles' Creed* and the *Nicene Creed*. In responding to the question of *Common Table*'s denominational affiliation, the FAQs webpage indicates that this community is 'inter-denominational', seeking to bridge across the breadth of the Christian tradition. Still, this response concludes with the affirmation that the *Common Table* community shares a strong kinship with the emerging church movement. Finally, in responding to the question concerning what the weekly worship gatherings are like, this page highlights the distinct role that prayer, music, scripture, and the Eucharist play in this emerging community. In stressing both the commonalities and differences between their worship gatherings and other ecclesial worship gatherings, this page states that the *Common Table* community draws strongly from liturgical prayers of the Christian and Jewish tradition, even while leaving room for personal prayer. The text goes on to indicate that they conduct their gatherings 'in the round'. The page concludes by stressing that many of the common elements of the community's liturgy are expressed by music from various genres and centuries, and that they practise the Eucharist each week. The page indicates that the style of music

is predominately folk/acoustic and the atmosphere surrounding the Eucharist is festive.

Description of the *Common Table* Worship Gathering

Having given an overview of the weekly rhythms and physical spaces of this emerging church, I now offer a more in-depth account of the *Common Table* worship gatherings. Although each night followed the set liturgical pattern described in the above overview, the theme of the night, the song selections, and the weekly conversation would vary from gathering to gathering. Thus, in order to present a rich account of this emerging church's worship life, the following segments mirror the format of the description of the Novitas worship gathering in the previous chapter—first providing an initial sketch of one complete Sunday evening gathering, followed by illustrative examples of music, conversations, and activities from different evenings.⁵²³

Narration through Initial Worship Gathering

My first worship encounter with the *Common Table* community took place on 3 May 2009. At this point in my participation with this emerging church, the community was gathering for worship in the Rue Street space at 17:00. Prior to entering the field, I had signed up to receive the community's email updates. Although the emails I received from this subscription were rare, I did get an update on Friday, 1 May. In addition to a notice about the upcoming move from the Rue Street space to the Horizons Centre space, and information concerning *Our City Care*, home group, and pub group, the email also contained information about this particular evening's worship. Noting that it was the Fourth Sunday of Easter, the email written by Mike introduced the lectionary text and theme of that evening's conversation. He wrote:

This week's dialogue has an odd working title: 'Non-Sequitur: The Good Shepherd and His Martyrs'—but don't hold that against me. We will continue our conversation in Acts 4. For this week, read Acts 4:13-37 to get a preview of the dialogue. The lectionary for this week brings us several texts about God as a good shepherd. But the story of the unfolding church in Acts 4 brings hints of persecution, injustice, and the foreshadowing of the martyrdom of leaders that follows

⁵²³ I have also chosen to follow the format of the *Novitas* description by selecting my first encounter with the *Common Table* community as the night for the initial sketch. Again, in highlighting this night, I am attempting to provide an 'outsiders' first impression of the community gathering.

(beginning with Stephen). How do these concepts hold together? Does a good shepherd allow his or her sheep to suffer? This week will explore the goodness of a faith that requires the whole of our lives. Really!⁵²⁴

I read the Acts text in preparation for the worship gathering. Arriving at 16:45, I made my way through the glass door that led from the city sidewalk into the main gathering space of the community. To my right, a labyrinth had been laid out on the hardwood floor in blue tape. At times portions of this blue tape would be covered with tables and chairs, and during my stint with the community, the presence of the labyrinth was not acknowledged. A young woman sat on a couch to my left, and as I moved further into the main space she greeted me with a smile and handed me several sheets of various coloured letter-sized paper. On these sheets of paper was the order of the service, the evening's scripture reading, and the lyrics to the music that would be played during the liturgy. Also included in these sheets of paper was a welcome to those who might be there for the first time—with information on the pub group, the home group, and various persons to contact for pastoral care or involvement in the ministries of the community. I noticed that three holes were punched down the left side of the paper, and that several community participants had binders on a nearby shelf, which they collected upon entering, and then inserted these sheets into.

Entering even further into the main space, I observed several participants already seated in the couches and chairs, which had been arranged around the instruments and stools placed in the centre of the room. The musicians were already in the centre rehearsing, and their music filled the space. Mike noticed me as I moved towards an arrangement of chairs and quickly walked over to where I was standing and introduced himself. He offered me some coffee and a light snack that had been arranged on the table in the nearby hallway. After a brief conversation, Mike introduced me to Gordon, who himself was a relatively new participant in the *Common Table* community. Since Gordon and I were both new to this emerging church, and since we both originated from a similar part of the country, we developed an immediate rapport with one another. Our exchange on this night was brief however, as shortly after we sat down, the worship service began.

⁵²⁴ Common Table, e-mail message to subscribers, 1 May 2009.

As already indicated, *Common Table*'s Sunday evening gatherings followed a set liturgical pattern, and this particular worship service unfolded along those established lines, with the liturgy consisting of a call to gather, a greeting, preparation, scripture reading, conversation, confession, absolution, Eucharist celebration, and benediction. Like many of these movements, the beginning 'call to gather' was facilitated through a song and thus, Joshua, the musician leading this portion of the liturgy, spoke first. After a brief verbal welcome, Joshua (on keyboard), and an accompanying cellist and a female vocalist performed *Beneath the Damage and the Dust* (Himmelman, 1992):

Her eyes are sweet and dark as coal
But they've long since given up on finding someone to trust
She has a silver-plated soul beneath the damage and the dust
They say she's never known a single hour of stillness
And they say she's as dangerous as a child that can inspire lust
And you know that people's minds are so full of illness
They never look beneath the damage and the dust
I want to lift her up, I've got to pick her up
I want to raise her up from the dust
I've got to lift her up
She's walking downtown on a foggy summer evening
Everybody watches with a blend of wonder and disgust
I want so bad to stop her grieving
To raise her from beneath the damage and the dust
To think that she was once some mother's baby
Left out in the rain like some dream that's gone to rust
Well they say that loneliness can drive you crazy
It can bury you beneath the damage and the dust

As was the case with much of the music played in the worship gatherings, no interpretation of this particular song was provided. Discerning the significance of the music facilitating the specific liturgical movements was left to the participant. Still, the repeated desire to be lifted up, picked up, or raised up 'from beneath the damage and the dust' provided me with a helpful indication of why this particular piece was selected to call the community to gather and worship.

Following this opening song, Mike stepped to the centre of the worship space, and greeted the *Common Table* community, welcoming them again to the worship gathering and giving a brief update about this emerging church's recent involvement with an *Our City Care* initiative that focused on technological inequalities in the Springfield public school system. During this greeting, Mike also introduced the

Common Table community to those who might be participating for the first time. This introduction highlighted the community's commitment to discern God's redemptive activity in Springfield, and to participate in that.

After this explanation of *Common Table's* commitment, Mike offered a prayer for the evening and then Joshua introduced the songs of preparation. Noting that the reoccurring themes surfacing through the lectionary readings at recent worship gatherings have focused on the way in which death intertwines with life when one chooses the way of Jesus, Joshua emphasized how being alive to what God was calling one to do, often means dying to one's own desires. The music selected for this portion of the liturgy was designed to rehearse this motif. The first song was a musical adaptation of *The Dark Night of the Soul* by John of the Cross (McKennitt, 1994), and expressed well these recent themes—containing fitting phrases such as 'I lost myself to him and laid my face upon my lovers breast'. The second song selected was the traditional Irish hymn, *Be Thou My Vision* (public domain), and it too expressed well the themes highlighted in Joshua's introduction, with verses such as 'riches, I heed not, nor man's empty praise, thou mine inheritance, through all of days, thou and thou only, first in my heart, high king of heaven, my treasure thou art'. During these songs of preparation, only a small number of the forty to fifty community participants present that evening sang with the musicians—with *Be Thou My Vision* eliciting the liveliest contribution. This sparse participation in the singing was a common feature that I would observed in many of the community's other worship gatherings.

Mike transitioned to the 'Sunday Conversation' portion of the liturgy following the songs of preparation. On this night he invited those participating to stand and greet one another in preparation for the dialogue. We were instructed to introduce ourselves to those seated around us, or to share the peace of Christ with those we knew. Since this was my first time participating with the *Common Table* community, I had several individuals introduce themselves to me—including the cellist. Mike then called the community back together and, after a brief conversation about the upcoming move to the new worship space and the production of a new musical CD that features some of the songs that guide the liturgy of this emerging church, he transitioned to the evening's dialogue. This portion of the worship

gathering began with a female member of the community coming to the centre of the room and reading the day's lectionary text (Acts 4:13-37). Following this reading Mike, sitting on the stool behind a microphone at the centre of the room, began the conversation by telling of his general desire to influence others. His style of engagement appeared relaxed and informal. As was the case with most worship gatherings, Mike encourage dialogue with those in the community by not only opening up the conversation for input from participants, but also by directing specific questions to individuals—oftentimes calling them by name and asking for their input. In fact, even though this was my initial evening with the *Common Table* community, Mike directed a question to me during this opening introduction to the dialogue.⁵²⁵

As the dialogue continued, the theme of 'witness' emerged, and Mike asked the community to consider the ways in which they react to the idea of giving witness to the goodness of God or to the person of Jesus. Many of the responses to this question involved a humorous look at the act of proselytizing. One male participant told of his experiences as a youth in a church he described as fundamentalist. He relayed how the Sunday night gatherings of this community involved a time when each member of the congregation had to share with the minister the number of 'souls they had won' that previous week. This story was met with laughter from the other participants, and some light banter between the participant and Mike. Another male participant spoke of how the idea of witness made him think of missionaries from the *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* who would go door to door in his neighbourhood. Again, laughter and banter between Mike, this participant, and others ensued—with some conversation partners admitting that they hid or locked the door when they saw the missionaries coming. Other participants shared clever pamphlets or 'gospel tracts' that they had seen when younger, or of the pressures they had placed upon them to capitalise on opportunities to 'share the gospel' with friends in high school. This led to a further discussion between Mike and several of the participants about how 'witness' implies 'burden', with one individual suggesting that he once thought that it was up to him to save the world.

⁵²⁵ Mike asked if I was familiar with the *DiSC* personality test. See: www.thediscpersonalitytest.com

As was the case with most weekly conversations, Mike guided this time and would frequently summarize or respond to the comments made by each participant. On this particular night he offered several concluding remarks about ideas that are commonly associated with witness—suggesting that oftentimes awkward theology emerges around this topic and observing that other things are frequently attached to ‘the good news’. In explaining this, Mike spoke for an extended amount of time, moving away from the dialogue format that had previously guided the Sunday conversation portion of the liturgy. He conveyed that the idea of giving witness becomes problematic when people attach things such as, ‘you will be a better parent’ or ‘your life will be better’ to the invitation to follow the way of Jesus. Mike suggested that ideas such as these sometimes prevent the *Common Table* community from giving witness to Jesus. Continuing, Mike also suggested that postmodern and pluralistic settings create an environment where one doubts what exactly it is that *can* be proclaimed. Using the *Common Table* community as an example, he suggested that there was a diversity of perspectives and beliefs held by those participating, and thus because there is not an agreement in the community about what they think, it is difficult to agree about what they can say. In response to this situation, the community then turned to the evening’s text to see what light it might shed on their current dilemma.

In introducing the text, Mike asked a series of questions around what it was we as a community could proclaim. Because these questions were rhetorical in nature, they went unanswered by other participants. Instead of dialoguing around these questions, Mike spoke of what was proclaimed in the lectionary text. First, he spoke of the economic issues raised by the proclamation that the early Christian community shared everything. In doing this, he made reference to how this theme emerged from discussions arising from the ‘text group’. This ‘text group’ is a smaller group of community participants who meet earlier in the week to identify and discuss the themes surfacing in Sunday evening’s lectionary readings. Mike also spoke of how a sermon was proclaimed in the text as well. He asked if this sermon could be summed up in a sentence, and a community participant responded, ‘God trumps you’. Mike agreed and further commented that this was a proclamation that Jesus was Lord. He then considered how this statement is not as inflammatory in contemporary American culture as it would have been in first century Palestine, and

as a result it does not carry with it the same counter cultural message as it did for those in the text.

Mike then returned to dialoguing with community participants, asking them to reflect upon what it is that helps them speak out economically or proclaim a counter-story to contemporary culture. The first response came from a male member of the community, who spoke about how one must trust that another will take care of them. Mike responded to this assertion by reminding participants of the importance of these activities taking place in the context of a community. A female participant noted that she was frightened by the idea of needing to verbally proclaim her faith commitments by ‘knocking on doors’, but found comfort in the fact that she could proclaim her faith commitments through the way she lived. Mike responded in agreement with this comment as well, and then concluded the Sunday conversation by an extended commentary on how those in the text were obsessed with the resurrection. He suggested that this obsession could be mirrored in the *Common Table* community, and could give deep significance to the seemingly trivial activities of care that take place in this emerging church. In grounding this point, Mike told of particular activities that had taken place that week in the community—such as one member loaning a car to another.

This portion of the liturgy closed with Mike inviting community participants into a time of prayerful confession. Since music facilitates this portion of the liturgy, the musicians returned to the centre of the space. Before the songs of confession and absolution were performed, Joshua spoke of what the first piece meant to him. The song selected for confession was Tori Amos’ *Crucify* (Amos, 1992), and Joshua remarked that instead of being able to live the life of resurrection Mike described, he oftentimes would ‘beat himself up’ or try to sacrifice the wrong things. Joshua then began playing this piece, stating that it was the community’s confession on this night. The lyrics to this piece were fitting for confession, as the refrain and chorus declare:

I’ve been looking for a saviour in these dirty streets
Looking for a saviour beneath these dirty sheets
I’ve been raising up my hands—drive another nail in
Just what God needs, one more victim

Why do we crucify ourselves Everyday I crucify myself

Nothing I do is good enough for you Crucify myself
Everyday I crucify myself
And my heart is sick of being in chains

This song also carried with it requests for deliverance in its closing line—‘save me I cry’.

A song of absolution immediately followed the song of confession. On this night, the cellist played an instrumental arrangement of a piece of music that he described as ‘a work in progress’. The title of this piece of music was *Balm of Gilead*, and while it was a non-lyrical arrangement, the lyrics to the traditional spiritual *Balm of Gilead* were printed on the hand out—reflecting well themes associated with absolution:

There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin-sick soul

If you can pray like Peter
If you can preach like Paul
Go home and tell your loved ones
He died to save us all

Following the songs of confession and absolution, the community participants were invited to celebrate the Eucharist. Joshua introduced this portion of the liturgy, alerting participants to the bread and wine that had been placed on two tables positioned on either side of the worship space. In inviting the communicants to participate in this ritual, Joshua noted *Common Table*’s non-traditional approach to Eucharist celebration. He remarked that communion in this community was more conversational and ‘louder’ than what one might encounter in other traditions. He invited participants to share in conversation with one another as they come forward to the tables. He also instructed the participants to serve one another the bread and the wine as they discussed the particulars of their lives. Because this was my first encounter with the *Common Table* community, and because I was not familiar with the Eucharistic practices of this emerging church, I experienced a high degree of uncertainty during this portion of the liturgy. As I made my way to the table, I did not converse with other participants. While some small conversations were held

around me, the majority of participants focused on receiving and distributing the bread and wine. During many of the other worship gatherings, the communion leader would urge the participants in this ritual to enunciate, ‘the body of Christ, given for you’ when breaking off a piece of bread and handing it to a fellow communicant, and likewise, ‘the blood of Christ, shed for you’ when pouring and serving the wine. Yet, on this particular night, Joshua did not provide specific detail on how the bread and wine were to be distributed. Still, the participants who were familiar with *Common Table*’s Eucharist celebration did recite these words as they enacted the above. On each table rest a jar of wine, a jar of juice, and a loaf of bread. There were small paper cups into which the communicant’s choice of wine or juice was poured. The bread was garlic, and this surprised me and several other participants, who commented that this was the first time they had used garlic bread for the Eucharist at *Common Table*.

After receiving and distributing the Eucharistic elements, I entered into a conversation with several community participants standing around the communion table. These particular participants were also new to the *Common Table* community—having been participating with this emerging church for less than a year. Our conversation was informal, and centred on introductory topics such as where we were from, where we were living, and our current professions. This portion of discussion was lengthy, lasting approximately ten minutes. During this time, the hum of participant’s voices filled the room as they visited casually with one another. As the conversation between the participants continued, the musicians retuned to the centre of the worship space and performed the final portion of the night’s liturgy.

On this night the benedictory song was Loreena McKennitt’s *Never Ending Road* (McKennitt, 2006). The lyrics of this piece served as a fitting benediction as they conveyed the theme of journeying with and towards the divine.⁵²⁶ Yet, I and other participants did not cease our conversation for this portion of the liturgy, and so we

⁵²⁶ Key lines from the song affirm: ‘all roads lead to you, there is no journey’s end’; ‘here is my heart and I give it to you, take me with you across this land’; and ‘the road now leads onward and I know not where, I feel in my heart that you will be there’.

did not actively take part in the benediction. Indeed, many of the conversations taking place around the worship space increased in volume during this portion of the liturgy, as participants attempted to speak to one another over the music. While the benediction marked the formal end of the worship gathering, the conversations that I began around the table continued. After meeting a couple more participants, and engaging in introductory conversations, I concluded my first visit with the *Common Table* community.⁵²⁷

Liturgical Elements in Worship

While most Sunday evenings followed the above set liturgical pattern, there were frequent variations in the musical content of the distinct movements, and occasional variation in the structure of the liturgy itself. In this section I provide examples of the different liturgical elements present in the worship gatherings of this emerging church—focusing first on the various songs used to facilitate the liturgical movements, and then turning my attention to instances where the community deviated from their set liturgy.

As already indicated, music was a central component of this emerging church's liturgy and it played a pivotal role in navigating the community through five of the nine liturgical movements (i.e., call to gather, preparation, confession, absolution, and benediction). The overall musical style was folk, and although some traditional hymns and contemporary 'praise and worship' songs were included in the liturgy, the majority of the songs selected were modern folk or rock in origin. Examples of the songs used for the *call to gather* during my time with the community included popular rock songs like Switchfoot's *Dare You to Move* (Foreman, 2003), U2's *In God's Country* (Bono, Clayton, The Edge, Mullen, Jr., 1987), and the Foo Fighter's *Times Like These* (Grohl, Hawkins, Mendel, Shiflett, 2002). Tracy Chapman's folk song *Talkin' 'bout a Revolution* was also used as a call to gather (Chapman, 1988). Songs such as these carried with them themes of an invitation into a distinct or

⁵²⁷ On some Sunday evenings, small groups of participants would informally gather at local restaurants for dinner. While I was not invited to join a group on this first night, on many other nights I would be invited. These dinners were informal and the conversations centred on the personal lives of the participants.

different space and an anticipation or expectation of new beginnings. These themes emerged clearly through the lyrics of *Dare You to Move*:

Welcome to the planet
Welcome to existence
Everyone's here
Everyone's here
Everybody's watching you now
Everybody waits for you now
What happens next
What happens next

I dare you to move
I dare you to move
I dare you to lift yourself up off the floor
I dare you to move
I dare you to move
Like today never happened
Today never happened before

Welcome to the fallout
Welcome to resistance
The tension is here
Tension is here
Between who you are and who you could be
Between how it is and how it should be

Maybe redemption has stories to tell
Maybe forgiveness is right where you fell
Where can you run to escape from yourself?
Where you gonna go?
Where you gonna go?
Salvation is here

I dare you to move
I dare you to move
I dare you to lift yourself up off the floor
I dare you to move
I dare you to move
Like today never happened
Today never happened
Today never happened
Today never happened before

The themes of invitation into a 'set apart' space and the expectation of new beginnings were also present in the lyrics of *In God's Country* and *Times Like These*.

The former declares, ‘we need new dreams tonight’, and ‘we’ll punch a hole through the night, everyday the dreamers die, see what’s on the other side’. The Foo Fighter’s *Times Like These* also declares:

It’s times like these you learn to live again
It’s times like these you give and give again
It’s times like these you learn to love again
It’s times like these time and time again

As indicated in the above narration through the initial worship gathering, the second set of songs in the community’s liturgy—the songs of preparation—was designed to introduce the themes arising from the evening’s scriptural texts. An apt example of this occurred on the Sunday night when the lectionary readings were Ezekiel 2:1-10, Mark 6:1-6, and 2 Corinthians 12:2-10. Before the community’s conversation around these texts, Joshua introduced the theme of evening, which centred on a prophetic word coming to a people who did not want to hear the message. Joshua noted how the messages being proclaimed in these prophetic words announced that pain was coming, but then concluded by offering hope—suggesting that the pain would give way to a new day. The lyrics from the songs selected for preparation carried within them this theme as well. The first song, *Yahweh* by U2 (Bono, Clayton, The Edge, Mullen, Jr., 2004), voiced these themes, affirming ‘Yahweh, Yahweh, always pain before a child is born. Yahweh, Yahweh, still waiting for the dawn’. Similarly, Sarah Groves’ *The Long Defeat* (Groves, 2007) echoed these themes with the lyrics, ‘I pray for a vision and a way I cannot see. It’s too heavy to carry and impossible to leave. And I pray for inspiration and a way I cannot see. It’s too heavy to carry and impossible to leave. It’s too heavy to carry and I will never leave’. Both these songs prepared the community for this particular dialogue portion of the liturgy by pointing to something that one could hope in beyond an anticipated pain.

Following the dialogue portion of the liturgy, the musicians would lead the community through a song of confession and a song of absolution. Songs such as Peter Himmelman’s *Impermanent Things* (Himmelman, 1991) and Bruce Springsteen’s *Devils and Dust* (Springsteen, 2005) provided the words for this community’s confessions. As can be seen in these two examples, on some occasions

the songs would specifically confess particular actions or attitudes, on other occasions the songs confessed a general situation or condition. Himmelman's piece can be seen as an example of the former, as these excerpts from the lyrics confess a misplaced devotion to temporal things:

All these impermanent things
Oh how they fool me
Dominate and rule me
They keep me waiting here forever...

All these impermanent things
Well they're trying to convince me
Baptize my soul and rinse me
Purge my mind of honesty and fire

All these impermanent things
Well they all add up to zero
They make-believe that they're my hero
Then they fill my mind with doubt and false desires

Why keep hanging on
To things that never stay
Things that just keep stringin' us along
From day to day

Conversely, as demonstrated in the following excerpts, the confession conveyed through Springsteen's *Devils and Dust* is more focused on the general condition of one's 'heart' or 'soul':

Now every woman and every man
They wanna take a righteous stand
Find the love that God wills
And the faith that He commands
I've got my finger on the trigger
And tonight faith just ain't enough
When I look inside my heart
There's just devils and dust

Well I've got God on my side
And I'm just trying to survive
What if what you do to survive
Kills the things you love
Fear's a dangerous thing
It can turn your heart black you can trust
It'll take your God filled soul
Fill it with devils and dust
Yeah it'll take your God filled soul

Fill it with devils and dust

A song of absolution followed the song of confession in the *Common Table* liturgy, and ranged from traditional hymns such as *The Old Rugged Cross* (Bernard, traditional) to contemporary folk and rock pieces such as *Show the Way* (Wilcox, 1994) and *Breathe (2AM)* (Nalick, 2004). While the theme of absolution comes through clearly in hymn lyrics such as ‘twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died, to pardon and sanctify me’ from *The Old Rugged Cross*, divine love and forgiveness can also be seen in other musical selections. For instance, David Wilcox’s *Show the Way* employs the metaphor of a play to argue for the hope of divine love prevailing over evil:

You say you see no hope, you say you see no reason
We should dream that the world would ever change
You're saying love is foolish to believe
'Cause there'll always be some crazy with an Army or a Knife
To wake you from your daydream, put the fear back in your life.

Look, if someone wrote a play just to glorify
What's stronger than hate, would they not arrange the stage
To look as if the hero came too late he's almost in defeat
It's looking like the Evil side will win, so on the edge
Of every seat, from the moment that the whole thing begins

It is Love who makes the mortar
And it's love who stacked these stones
And it's love who made the stage here
Although it looks like we're alone
In this scene set in shadows
Like the night is here to stay
There is evil cast around us
But it's love that wrote the play
For in this darkness love can show the way

While not explicitly announcing forgiveness or absolving the participants of sins confessed, songs such as these speak to the prevailing love of God, and guide the community into the Eucharist celebration.

Following the Eucharist celebration, the closing song of the worship gathering was the song of benediction. Similar to the songs that called the community to gather, no interpretations of these songs were provided by those leading the worship gathering.

Still, by closing with songs such as Pierce Pettis' *God Believes in You* (Pettis, 1998), Over the Rhine's *Spark* (Bergquist, Detweiler, 2005), and Loreena McKennitt's *Never Ending Road* (McKennitt, 2006)—which served as the benediction on several different evenings during my participation with this community—themes of being blessed by God emerged through the lyrics. I have already indicated in the above section how *Never Ending Road* conveyed the theme of journeying with and towards the divine. Other themes of blessing can be seen in the lyrics of *Spark*, which assert, 'love can turn this around, I wake up dreaming everything we've lost can be found', and the lyrics of *God Believes in You*, which assert that:

When you rise up just to fall again
God believes in you
Deserted by your closest friends
God believes in you
When you're betrayed with a kiss
Turn your cheek to another fist
It doesn't have to end like this
God believes in you

While on most nights, the final piece of music concluded the formal gathering of the community, on at least one occasion, Mike, in addition to the song of benediction, offered a verbal benediction—inviting the community to remember the breadth of God's love and forgiveness, and to go in peace.

Only rarely did the community deviate from their set liturgy. On Pentecost Sunday, the community included a 'Minister's liturgy' as a part of their worship gathering. This liturgy, crafted by the *Common Table* community, was designed as an induction ceremony for those wishing to make more formal alliances with this community.⁵²⁸ Modelled after an ordination service, this portion of the liturgy was a responsive reading that followed the songs of preparation. Mike led this portion of the liturgy, and, after reading aloud the principles that guided the community—which included imitating Christ, simplifying one's life, engaging missionally in Springfield, and cultivating disciplines of prayer, scripture study, and authentic dialogue—he asked those wishing to formalize their commitment if they felt called to be part of this 'community of ministers'. He read that their tasks as ministers will be, 'to proclaim

⁵²⁸ For more on the Minister's Liturgy, see the below section on eclectic appropriation.

by word and deed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to fashion your life in accordance with its precepts'. After outlining this in more detail, which included loving and serving others, and sharing 'in the celebration of the mysteries of Christ's Body and Blood', Mike then asked if they would commit to this call—inviting them to respond with 'I will'. Following this liturgy, the community continued the weekly liturgy with the songs of confession, absolution, and the Eucharist celebration. The weekly conversation portion of the liturgy then took place following the Eucharist.

Other instances where the community deviated from their set liturgy occurred around the time of the move from the *Rue Street* space to the *Horizons Centre* space. Because many of the furnishings and equipment in the worship space was in the process of being packed up for removal, or unpacked after arriving, music was not drawn upon to guide the community through the liturgy on these nights. Also, due to the fact that the packing and the move took place on Sunday evenings, the liturgy was shortened during those weeks in order to allow participants time to help. The shortened, non-musical liturgy drew heavily on the language and structure of the *Holy Eucharist* liturgy in the U.S. Episcopal Church's *Book of Common Prayer*. In fact, in an informal conversation with Mike, he informed me that the overall structure of the community's weekly liturgy is adapted from the liturgies from this prayer book.

Community Conversations During Worship Gatherings

While on-going conversations between individual participants took place before and after the formal gathering of this emerging church—as well as during the Eucharist celebration—the *Common Table* community established a set portion of their liturgy that focused on a community conversation around a scriptural text. On all but two nights during my participation, Mike led the community through this portion of the liturgy.⁵²⁹ While term 'conversation' was employed to describe this portion of the liturgy, the dialogue that took place was closely focused, steadily governed, and largely carried by the person leading the dialogue.

⁵²⁹ On one night the conversation portion of the liturgy was led by a male participant and on another night the conversation was led by a female participant.

On most Sunday evenings, a participant in the community would read the evening's scriptural text and then the conversation would begin by Mike either introducing a theme for discussion or asking the community to give their response to the text. An example of the former occurred on evening following the reading of 2 Peter 1:1-11. The community was beginning a thematic series playfully named *Sequels*, and the dialogue portion of the liturgy for the coming weeks would be focused on texts such as *Second Peter* and *Second Thessalonians*. On this night, Mike began the community conversation with a general question about their impression of movie sequels. The banter that ensued questioned whether or not a sequel could be better than the original film. The point Mike sought to stress through this conversation starter was that due to the lack of originality in a movie sequel, the second film often employs overzealous techniques in its attempt to surpass the first. He carried this analogy over to the 'sequel' texts of scripture—suggesting these works draw upon intense rhetoric to distinguish their message. While conversation starters such as this one—which allowed those present to lightheartedly engage Mike in a discussion about movie sequels—invited participants into the dialogue on an introductory level, on most nights, the conversation began with a pointed question arising from that week's texts. An example of this type of invitation to the conversation occurred on Ascension Sunday.

Following a community participant's reading of Acts 1:11, Mike asked those present that night if they had ever contemplated this passage on the ascension of Christ. One participant remarked that his image of this scene had strong druidic associations—imagining it taking place in a setting like Stonehenge, and those present wearing dark robes as one in their midst floats up into the clouds. Another participant suggested that the lack of detail surrounding this event—and the events taking place in the forty days between the resurrection and ascension—was perplexing. Mike laughingly suggested it could be compared to a bad comedic film, which runs out of material and is thus forced to end abruptly. Others also admitted to not having given this particular episode much thought—at which point Mike suggested that he himself had never heard a sermon on the ascension. Several participants who had given consideration to the ascension added their contribution to the conversation. One community member, after first mentioning that he too thinks this episode is often ignored, remarked that he often contemplated where exactly Jesus went. His

particular concern was that if Jesus had been physically resurrected, he was still physically living, and thus had to go ‘somewhere’. Another participant, acknowledging that his thought was influenced by N.T. Wright’s popular work *Surprised by Hope*,⁵³⁰ suggested that Christ had not floated into the clouds, but rather had disappeared, and Christ’s ascension is to be interpreted as marking the joining together of heaven and earth. He attempted to dissuade the community from seeing this as a ‘fluffy’ event, and rather to embrace it as an event laden with profound cosmological significance. As was the case with many of the community’s discussion, reaching a consensus concerning an interpretation of the ascension was not attempted. Following this conversation, Mike asked whether or not it would have been better for Jesus to have stayed. Interestingly, this question, was asked rhetorically, and therefore was not taken up by the community. Instead, Mike used it to transition into an extending discourse around the significance of the ascension.

While opening question such as the above often started the conversation, these were usually followed by extend periods where the leader of the dialogue would speak. Still, occasional questions were interspersed throughout the conversation, and participants were frequently asked for their input at the conclusion of the dialogue portion of the liturgy. An instance of a community wide dialogue emerging as a result of a question asked in the middle of the conversation portion of the liturgy occurred one evening around the topic of ethical discussions. Mike asked the community to consider their own experiences of ethical discussions, and how conflicting ethical perspectives might be reconciled. Several participants insinuated that the process of making ethical determinations could be confused by other factors. One individual commented that monetary concerns often take precedence over ethical concerns in her profession. Another suggested that legal concerns could also cloud ethical discussions. He suggested that lawyers and courts are more concerned about what might or might not be legal in a situation—as opposed to what might and might not be ethical in that situation. In the midst of these responses, the discussion took a more theological turn, as one community participant lamented that God is often taken ‘out of the equation’ when it comes to ethical discussions. He suggested

⁵³⁰ N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper One, 2008).

that if God does not ground our ethics, then it is up to each individual to determine what is right for herself or himself. Going further, he held up a bible and suggested that unless those discussing ethics agreed that this was ‘God’s word’, then there would be no common ground for discussion. Mike responded by noting that an ethical discussion that makes appeals to different authorities does not go very well. Another participant challenged the notion that differences in ethical discussions could be overcome by simply recognizing scripture as an authority. He noted that even though Christians share scripture as a source of authority, they read it very differently. He suggested that because Christians could read scripture from within a Catholic tradition, or approach it through a Baptist way of thinking, we can never arrive at some solid ‘thing’ that is ‘argument proof’. Instead, he proposed that because Christians have different ways of drawing on scripture to tell their stories, ethical discussions ultimately come down to who can ‘out narrate’ whom. Although he thought this seemed chaotic and hopeless, he suggested that this best represents the reality of the situation and that we need to accept it. In response to this claim, Mike confirmed that there were a number of approaches to reading scripture, and supported this by giving an example from his own experience of discussing certain texts with a group that had representatives from a number of traditions. Again, like many of the conversations that took place in this emerging church, a consensus on how to ground ethical discussions was not reached.

As these instances of community conversation demonstrate, Mike, as the frequent leader of the dialogue, focused the discussion and typically responded to each point that was made by participants. Importantly, the leader of the dialogue also made use of a microphone—amplifying the voice of the leader over the voices of participants who spoke without a microphone. Thus, although a notable amount of community wide conversation took place during the weekly worship gatherings, much of it was framed, directed, and influenced by that evening’s conversation leader.

Community Life Beyond Sunday Worship Gathering

As indicated in the initial overview of the *Common Table* community, participants in this emerging church were encouraged to contribute to smaller groups throughout the week—such as a home group or the pub group. Additionally, many of the Common Table participants were also engaged with the work of a grassroots economic and

political advocacy organization called *Our City Care*. In this section, I describe these various activities in the aim of presenting a fuller picture of the communal life of this emerging church.

Pub Group

On Thursday nights, *Common Table* participants were invited to gather at a local tavern in downtown Springfield to engage in a community conversation over a couple of pints. On most nights, eight to ten *Common Table* participants would assemble around several small tables that had been pulled together in a cosy room tucked away from the pub's main bar space. On nights when more participants were present, the group spilled over into other tables. When the group size was smaller, a single booth in the pub sufficed. This varied arrangement created a dynamic where, on some weeks, the entire gathered group would participate in a common conversation, whereas on other weeks, a number of smaller conversations would take place independent of one another.

In distinction from the community conversations that took place during the weekly worship gathering, there was no one single person designated to lead the dialogue at the pub group, and thus the conversation developed in a more informal way during this time. Instead of having someone lead the pub group discussion, Joe, a community participant, would circulate a scholarly article or book chapter via email to other community participants. This article or chapter would then form the basis for that evening's pub group discussion. On some nights, a robust conversation around the circulated piece would take place, while on others nights, the reading would not be referenced at all. While not referencing the reading was atypical, the level of attention that the article did receive depended on how many of the participants had read it, how many of the participants found the subject matter interesting, and whether or not a more compelling conversation emerged during the evening together. Again, since there was not a set facilitator to lead the pub group conversation, community participants were able to take the discussion in any direction they desired.

The articles and chapters the pub group engaged with during my involvement covered topics such as Darwinism, torture, Hebrew war, the ‘new atheism’, and the book of Daniel.⁵³¹ On the evening we discussed the article on torture, there were a larger number of participants present, and so smaller conversations broke out around the various tables. Since the two other participants that I was in conversation with had not read the article, I attempted to summarize the main argument for them. The thrust of the article was about the way in which a narrative influence by the Eucharist can be used to resist a narrative of ‘torture’—a narrative that seeks to clarify who ‘we’ are and reinforce distinctions between ‘us’ and our enemies. Yet, our conversation that night did not focus on the content of the argument, but rather on whether or not torture was ethical. Through the conversation, as various scenarios were put forward, the question of whether or not we would condone torture in that particular instance was asked. Each of us constructed a scenario, often involving the protection of children or those close to us, and affirmed that we could condone torture in that instance. While this conversation had little to do with the aim of the article, it provides an example of how tangential discussions emerged in the pub group. On other nights when conversation drifted away from the circulated text, group members would discuss topics of interest to the *Common Table* community, such as contemporary American Evangelicalism; activities the group members were involved in, like *Our City Care*; and matters pertaining to their personal lives, such as family relationships, work, and leisure activities.

An example of a conversation that was more closely focused around the readings occurred on the night the pub group discussed Hebrew war. The focus of the circulated chapter, written from a religious studies perspective, was on the sacred place of war in the ancient Hebraic tradition—focusing on the place of ritual in the conquest narratives and Davidic wars in the Hebrew Scriptures. The discussion of

⁵³¹ Nandagopal R. Menon, “The Christian Doctrine of Creation and the Debate Over Darwinism: An Interview With Michael Hanby.” *Faith Magazine* (March-April 2007), <http://www.faith.org.uk/Publications/Magazines/Mar07/Mar07TheChristianDoctrineOfCreationAndTheDebateOverDarwinism.html> (accessed 4 June 2009); William T. Cavanaugh, “Telling the Truth About Ourselves: Torture and Eucharist in the U.S. Popular Imagination.” *The Other Journal* (May 2009), <http://theotherjournal.com/article.php?id=764> (accessed 12 May 2009); James A. Aho, *Religious Mythology and the Art of War: Comparative Religious Symbols of Military Violence* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981); Terry, Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); John J. Collins, “Daniel and His Social World.” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 39, no. 2 (April 1985): pp. 131-143.

the text began with one group participant suggesting that scriptures encouraging ‘holy war’ provided his atheistic colleagues valid reasons for dismissing the claims of not only Christianity, but also the claims of other theistic religions. In response to this, another participant asked about the grounds on which these colleagues formed their moral indignation—suggesting that a naturalistic approach does not provide sufficient grounding for an ethic. Other participants discussed the differences they saw between the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the God of the New Testament. While acknowledging the challenges presented by the conquest texts, I cautioned against this solution, which I suggested tended towards Marcionism. Following this, another participant argued that the actuality of the events in these narratives was perhaps ‘wishful thinking’ on behalf of the Hebrews—suggesting that these war stories were indeed embellished. As the lively conversation drew to a close, one group member noted that the chapter itself was long on problematic texts that Christians encounter, but short on solutions for the Christian who encounters these texts.

While not every *Common Table* participant took part in the pub group gatherings, the conversations that occurred on these evenings—and the concepts that emerged from the circulated articles—played a noticeable role in shaping the larger community discourse. For instance, on at least two occasions during my participation with this emerging church, the pub group discussions that took place on a Thursday evening were incorporated into the dialogue portion of the liturgy on the following Sunday. In fact, according to Mike, his time with the pub group on Thursday nights exists as a critical component in his weekly routine, and he frequently draws upon the themes that emerge during this time as he prepares to lead the dialogue portion of the Sunday evening worship gathering.⁵³² Furthermore, for those community participants who did regularly engage in the pub group discussions, this time represented a significant practice of the community for them. Indeed, even though Gordon admitted that, ‘going to a group where you can drink beer while you're doing a church function’⁵³³ played a large part in the reason that he found this time to be so meaningful, his

⁵³² Mike, turn 74.

⁵³³ Gordon, interview by author, Springfield, 23 June 2009, Gordon transcript, turn 94.

consistent presence and lively engagement with the group indicated that this was indeed a valued aspect of his participation in the community.

Home Group

Common Table participants also had the opportunity to gather regularly as a smaller group in the homes of other community members. During my participation with this emerging church there were a handful of these home groups gathering, and I was welcomed into one that met on Wednesday evenings on a fortnightly basis. Because home groups were intended to provide a more intimate setting for participants to confide in one another about various aspects of their spiritual journeys and their personal lives, I was asked by the members of this group to refrain from revealing any specific details concerning our time together. In adhering to this request, I first offer a broad stroke sketch of the basic format of the home group in which I participated, and then draw upon interview material to provide an additional perspective of the overall home group experience.

As already mentioned, the home group met on Wednesday evenings at the family residence of a community participant. Approximately six to eight adults, and one or two children, would attend these gatherings. The evenings began with informal conversation as participants intermittently arrived. Once everyone had made their way to the group, we would gather around the dinning room table of the home and converse about everyday affairs as we shared a meal with one another. As the meal drew to a close, Marcus, who acted as group facilitator, would transition the informal discussion into a more intentional conversation around a specific text this home group had decided to read together. During my participation with the group, they were reading N.T. Wright's highly accessible guide to the Gospel of Luke.⁵³⁴ While the readings for the evening covered four to five chapters of Luke (c. 50 pages in the Wright text), this material was used as a 'launching off point' for group discussions. For instance, on one evening the discussion centred on John the Baptist's harsh and prophetic words. Much of the conversation centred on whether or not this would be an acceptable approach in contemporary contexts. Specifically, the group discussed what it might mean to name something 'sin', and to draw attention to it in the action

⁵³⁴ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2004).

of others. They discussed how this compared to a more open ended approach, which was less confident in naming something ‘sin’.

Following the discussions focused on the evening’s text, the group spent time praying for one another. The members of the group used this time to share about personal matters such as the health of family members and workplace concerns. They also took this time to converse about things taking place in their emerging church and the wider community. After spending time praying for one another and for the other concerns raised by the members, the formal group time ended. Brief informal conversations followed, and after helping clean up after the meal, members would leave and the home group would conclude.

Charles, a *Common Table* participant and interviewee who had been with the community for approximately one year at the time of my fieldwork, spoke frequently of his home group experience during our interview. In fact, when I asked Charles what was the most significant practice of the *Common Table* community for him, he identified his home group participation, saying that this group ‘can be, and are, some of the people we’re closest to, some of the people that know us best, some of the people that speak into our lives in the most intimate and meaningful ways’.⁵³⁵ I asked Charles to describe what takes place in his home group. He responded:

We have a meal together every week... We start off just chatting, and then we eat together. Then whoever brings the main dish that night—the entree—will pose a question of some kind. It could be biblical; typically it’s not. Typically it’s more life oriented, like, ‘what do you think about...?’ I think the first one we went to, the question was, ‘who are the poor and what does it mean for us as Christians that they’re the poor?’ We’ve talked about money, we’ve talked about food, we’ve talked about media, movies, music, we’ve talked about basically anything. So that’s been really cool, because you learn a lot about people. You’re talking about a wide range of subjects and people just openly sharing about what it is that they think, and who they are.⁵³⁶

⁵³⁵ Charles, interview by author, Springfield, 10 July 2009, Charles transcript, turn 92.

⁵³⁶ Charles, turn 84.

This perspective communicated by Charles provides an additional description of a home group, and reveals some of what participants find meaningful in these smaller, more intimate gatherings.

Our City Care

As indicated in the initial overview of the *Common Table* community, this emerging church, in their efforts to participate in community based activities and initiatives, partnered with a local economic and political advocacy organization called *Our City Care*. While *Our City Care* is an organization made of several diverse groups, the majority of member institutions are local congregations. As a multi-faith, multi-racial, strictly non-partisan, citizens' organization, *Our City Care* seeks to build relationships across race, social, and religious lines. They seek to accomplish this by identifying common concerns in the local community and then developing the skills of leaders inside member institutions so these groups can act together for the common good. This allows *Our City Care* to translate the deeply felt concerns among participating groups into concrete solutions that benefit the local community. For instance, prior to my arrival in Springfield, *Our City Care* had successfully lobbied for a 'fair wage' at a local university, and during my participation with *Common Table*, *Our City Care* was involved in lobbying efforts aimed at limiting the rates of interest charged by banks and creditors.

While undertaking fieldwork at this emerging church, I—along with several other individuals from *Common Table*—participated in two *Our City Care* gatherings. One was a training meeting for representatives from participating organizations, and the other was a demonstration calling for a ten per cent cap on bank and credit card interest rates. The first *Our City Care* gathering I participated in was held at a local Unitarian Universalist Fellowship building, and was designed to train representatives from member institutions on how to conduct 'house meetings' within their organization. These house meetings were developed in order to ascertain the priorities of member organizations, which will help form the agenda for *Our City Care* over the next few years. Two other *Common Table* participants were present at this gathering, and they were tasked with holding house meetings with other *Common Table* participants over the coming months in order to discuss the local community needs that participants in this congregation desired to collectively

address. This approach was intended to preserve the grassroots nature of *Our City Care*, and ensured that the community needs being addressed by this organization were connected to the concerns raised by member institutions like *Common Table*.

The second gathering I participated in took place on the city streets of downtown Springfield. *Our City Care*, along with several other community organizations sponsored a demonstration to urge banks and lending firms to cap interest rates on loans and credit cards at ten per cent. Myself and several other *Common Table* participants gathered with approximately fifty individuals from across the region on a Wednesday morning in order to march in this demonstration. The demonstration was to coincide with the release of a theological reflection paper on usury—authored by members of several different theological institutions in the area. In fact, one of the *Common Table* participants present that day was involved in the crafting of this reflection piece. After a few opening statements made by the demonstration organizers, which called into question the practice of taking advantage of those in financial crises through high interest rates, the approximately fifty demonstrators marched to three different financial institutions in downtown Springfield in order to deliver the theological reflection piece and request a meeting with the institution's CEO in order to have a discussion about their lending practices. Two other financial institutions in the downtown area, which presumably maintained lower interest rates on loans, sent their CEOs to the demonstration in order to receive the theological paper in person. While the banks we visited that day provided no immediate response to the demonstration, after my participation with the *Common Table* community, *Our City Care* has engaged in other demonstrations around the issue of usury and has kept its member institutions abreast of developments through annual reports.

These two gatherings give an indication of what on-going involvement in *Our City Care* might look like for *Common Table* participants. While only five to six *Common Table* participants engaged in these two particular gatherings, the community initiatives of *Our City Care* were referred to frequently in the worship gatherings and pub group, and remained an important focus of this emerging church.

Profiles and Narratives of Community Participants

In order to further develop this rich and textured portrait of the *Common Table* community, it is essential that I provide a detailed description of the narratives and profiles of the participants who makeup this emerging church. In this section, I continue the pattern established in the previous chapter by offering a deeper look into the identity of the community participants through the personal accounts of emergence given by interviewees. Like the profiles in the last chapter, the depictions below will begin with a brief sketch of the interviewee's age, length of involvement with *Common Table*, and their current role in the community. Following this, I take a look at their previous involvement with church and their reasons for emergence. Although these interviewees do not speak for the whole of the *Common Table* community, their stories do offer insights into the ecclesiological contexts out of which those participating in this church have emerged. They also help to reveal what it is that participants have found meaningful in their emerging church experiences.

Common Table Participant – Mike

As the above narration through the history and development of the *Common Table* community indicates, Mike (47) has been with the community 'from the very beginning'.⁵³⁷ He is considered the 'founding pastor' of *Common Table*, and currently maintains a lead role in this community.⁵³⁸ In addition to caring for the practical and pastoral needs of the community on a weekly basis, Mike gives 'a lot of energy [to] preparing the weekly worship gathering'.⁵³⁹ Yet, unlike his previous experiences as a pastor, the preparation for the worship gathering at *Common Table* takes place in a communal setting. This involves (1) meeting with a 'text group' early in the week to discuss the lectionary readings and identify emerging themes for Sunday's dialogue, (2) meeting with the musician leading the service to discuss those themes, and (3) gathering with the pub group on Thursday nights to gain relevant insights from the community, which can then be brought back into Sunday's dialogue.

⁵³⁷ Mike, turn 08.

⁵³⁸ Mike, turn 10.

⁵³⁹ Mike, turn 74.

Mike's previous experiences with church came from within evangelical and free church traditions. He 'grew up Southern Baptist' and 'attended a Baptist church as a college kid—sitting in the pews through my college days'.⁵⁴⁰ Following university, Mike went immediately to an evangelical seminary, and then began his ministerial vocation working with youth at a large, evangelical church in the north-eastern portion of the United States. As indicated in the history and development section above, Mike left this church to join the pastoral team at *Shelbyville Community Church*, where he would minister for fifteen years before his emergence with the *Common Table* community.

Since Mike's story of emergence overlaps with the development of the *Common Table* community, much of his narrative has already been described—particularly his involvement with *Emergent Village* and the widening gap between himself and many of the participants in the *Shelbyville Community Church*. Still, in many ways, Mike's reasons for emergence reach back further than his time with the Shelbyville community. Indeed, he noted how early experiences in the Southern Baptist church created some tension for him and shaped his view of the evangelical church. Mike remarked:

Part of my growing up—growing up rural Southern Baptist, being a kid whose sports and school took me out of the enclave a little bit—I was always aware that the church could be wrong because my church was wrong in my opinion on race... on issues of race and a variety of issues. So I knew that the church could be wrong and was in need of reformation from the very beginning. So those experiences began to form me.⁵⁴¹

Mike also developed a significant dissatisfaction with the programmatic approach found in evangelical mega-churches, which tended to structure their ministries around events and church programs. In explaining the reasons for his emergence, Mike said:

I'm not a real program person, and it's kind of odd [not] to be a program person and be in large churches, which are very programmatic and have to be. It's not wrong, there's nothing wrong with that, but one of the things that did emerge from that was the

⁵⁴⁰ Mike, turn 28.

⁵⁴¹ Mike, turn 32.

reality that in large churches, they often... if they couldn't minister to you programmatically—and even the relationships of ministry, if you couldn't fit into some sort of model of programmatic transformation, and I would include small groups in that—there really wasn't a lot of place for you. And there was a lot of energy and a lot of management that went into events and programs—some that I thought were decisively not necessary... and so I had begun to develop a bias to that.⁵⁴²

As these above 'biases' were developing, Mike was also growing increasingly dissatisfied with the wider evangelical community, noting that 'much of the evangelical community—both in its idiom, its theology, its tone, all of those things—deeply limited itself to a small minority of normal culture'.⁵⁴³ During this period of discontentment, Mike began deepening his relationship with the founding members of *Emergent Village*, and through these defining friendships, they 'explored theology together', 'encountered different ecclesiologies', and 'worked it out together and apart from each other'.⁵⁴⁴ As the *Common Table* community emerged, Mike began turning to those relationships as the primary place for working out these aspects. He suggests that this emerging church is 'the community that I'm living with and conceiving faith with; so it's the people that I'm committed to live close to, to care about, to be affected by, [and] to work together with'.⁵⁴⁵ For Mike, the Eucharist table is the lens through which these communal activities are interpreted, and thus he sees it as the most significant practice for this emerging church.

Common Table Participant – Heather

Similar to Mike, Heather (35) has also been with the *Common Table* community since its conception, and she not only took part in the early planning stages of this emerging church, but was also a member of the lead team during the initial years. At the time of our interview, Heather did not have any formal responsibility within the community, but informally, she focused her attention on caring for the *Common Table* worship space—bringing in items such as plants, flowers, crosses, and

⁵⁴² Mike, turn 32. [Transcription note: the word 'not' was included in the brackets above for purposes of clarity. While not actually spoken by the interviewee, this word was clearly intended given the immediate context.]

⁵⁴³ Mike, turn 32.

⁵⁴⁴ Mike, turn 32

⁵⁴⁵ Mike, turn 22.

paintings, as well as setting up chairs and helping with snacks. Heather noted the important role that room aesthetics could play in the worship gatherings, saying, ‘if people aren’t focused on what’s being said, and your mind wanders or you’re looking around, there’s different things that can trigger different thoughts or emotions’.⁵⁴⁶ At the time of our interview, Heather was working on a ‘mosaic table’ that will be used for communion. Community participants were asked to bring broken pieces of ceramic to be arranged in a mosaic and affixed to a table that will hold the elements. This project was deeply meaningful to Heather, as it allowed her to co-create a material object for use in the community’s worship. She explained this significance, saying that the mosaic table ‘was something that we were working on and just kind of carrying on the theme of the communion table being so central—that practice being so central to our beliefs—so the idea of people bringing their broken pieces and putting it together’.⁵⁴⁷

Heather was ‘brought up in an evangelical family’ and had ‘always gone to non-denominational churches’.⁵⁴⁸ The evangelical, non-denominational church that she belonged to before going to college would later join the Evangelical Free denomination. After attending a Christian college, Heather began participating in *Shelbyville Community Church*. Her experiences in this community were mixed. Noting that this church ‘was so big’, Heather remarked that, ‘it just felt really really lonely there. There are all these people here, and I’m sitting by myself’.⁵⁴⁹ Even though she ‘had a lot of friends in the young adult’s [ministry]’, the local area was ‘very transitional’, and thus Heather communicated that, ‘it felt lonely and I didn’t like being in such a big place’.⁵⁵⁰ Yet, through her involvement with the young adults ministry at *Shelbyville Community Church*, Heather met Mike and was ‘really impressed by [him] and his care for people’.⁵⁵¹ As Heather considered the meaningful relationships that she had with those outside the church, the

⁵⁴⁶ Heather, turn 24.

⁵⁴⁷ Heather, turn 28.

⁵⁴⁸ Heather, turn 32.

⁵⁴⁹ Heather, turn 36.

⁵⁵⁰ Heather, turn 36.

⁵⁵¹ Heather, turn 36.

conversations she had with Mike were tremendously helpful, and became influential in her emergence. She stated:

In [my job] I have a lot of really good friends who are amazing people, who really care for other people, who won't call themselves Christians, but yet I see them daily sacrificing themselves and living out the gospel, and it was just kind of confusing to me. So I think that conversations with Mike too about issues of seeing a broader perspective of the gospel, and that I don't have to put people in the us and them category was big.⁵⁵²

Heather identified further reasons for her emergence, which included the desire to be a part of a community that proactively embraced 'racial reconciliation', and was made up of 'people who genuinely care for each other'.⁵⁵³ Recognizing that *Common Table*, 'doesn't reflect the diversity that I wish it would racially', Heather suggested that the diverse, cross-racial partnerships the community formed with various organizations in its early days reflected 'the gospel', and 'carries out the passions that I feel like God has put on our heart and called us to do'.⁵⁵⁴

Ultimately, Heather believes that her participation in the *Common Table* community has given her a meaningful connection to the local city of Springfield, as well as a meaningful connection to the wider Christian church. Because Heather worked and lived in Springfield, she 'really cared about Springfield, and was excited to have a presence in Springfield' through *Common Table*.⁵⁵⁵ The community's liturgy and its emphasis on social action in the local community provided a deeper connection to the wider church for Heather. Her parents were from Anabaptist / Mennonite traditions, and because of the connection she saw between *Common Table*'s social action and Mennonite and Anabaptist principles, she remarked, 'I kind of feel like I'm going back to those roots'.⁵⁵⁶ As for the liturgy of *Common Table*, Heather sees this as instrumental in providing a meaningful tie to the wider Christian community. She explains:

⁵⁵² Heather, turn 36.

⁵⁵³ Heather, turn 36.

⁵⁵⁴ Heather, turn 36.

⁵⁵⁵ Heather, turn 36.

⁵⁵⁶ Heather, turn 32.

Being a part of *Common Table* has made me feel connected to the universal church in more of way, and so I see the church as a larger entity than I did. Whereas before, when I would say *Shelbyville Community Church* is my church, it was a kind of church, and that's what I mean, and now I think—especially with observing the liturgical calendar more and including the liturgy—I do feel this greater sense of the universal church.⁵⁵⁷

Beyond these deeper connections, Heather sees the importance of *Common Table* as being, 'the place where I go to worship', and 'the place where I gather with other people to talk about scripture, talk about God, you know to be challenged, to be encouraged'.⁵⁵⁸

Common Table Participant – Charles

If the narratives of Mike and Heather offer insight into the perspectives of those who have been with the *Common Table* community from its inception, Charles' story offers insight into the perspective of a participant who became a part of the community more recently. As already indicated, Charles (26) first came to this emerging church eleven months prior to our interview. He had no formal responsibility with the community, and his ecclesial background was 'of the Independent Baptist persuasion'.⁵⁵⁹ Charles remarked, 'I was born into, and raised in, a very fundamentalist version of the Baptist tradition. We called ourselves Independent Baptist, and both the words independent and fundamental were like badges of honour'.⁵⁶⁰ Describing the fundamentalist nature of this community, Charles said the church possessed:

A very, I mean a very, conservative doctrinal position. I mean doctrine as the height—as sort of the entrance into the community—was really important. In my particular persuasion, the King James Version of the bible was one of the preeminent values. Also a long list of cultural accoutrements—in terms of not going to movies, not drinking, not smoking. Dress was a big deal, particularly for women—I never saw my mom in pants, type thing. So, I mean all those things. It was doctrinal, it was social, it was cultural, and those

⁵⁵⁷ Heather, turn 22.

⁵⁵⁸ Heather, turn 22

⁵⁵⁹ Charles, turn 34.

⁵⁶⁰ Charles, turn 34.

things took on a very heavy sort of importance. It was a very, very rigid sort of a system.⁵⁶¹

After leaving home, Charles attended a Christian university that was ‘a lot more Calvinistic-Reformed in their theology’, and even though this institution was evangelical, he remarked that it ‘was probably left—considerably left in a lot of ways—from where I grew up, both socially and in some ways doctrinally’.⁵⁶² Attending a number of churches that were considered ‘acceptable’ by his university, Charles and his partner found it difficult to ‘connect’ with the other participants in these communities. He remarked, ‘we felt like people weren't really willing to open up and accept us. It was still a fairly insular sort of community... it was hard to break into that circle’.⁵⁶³ Following a move to a different city to attend graduate school, Charles started attending an evangelical mega-church. Because of the size of this community, Charles and his partner joined a small group, but found that it, ‘wasn't particularly meaningful in terms of our life or our spiritual life or any of that. We just felt like it was—I don't want to say bland—but there wasn't anything particularly attractive about that relationship that I experienced’.⁵⁶⁴

Not only did Charles struggle to find meaningful connections in these expressions of church, but he also struggled to reconcile the theology in these communities with his own intellectual and academic life. Suggesting that he possessed an intellectual need ‘to integrate what I was doing every day as an academic with faith’, Charles found these expressions of church straining.⁵⁶⁵ He remarked:

We got the sense that there was a very definite doctrinal and theological program... for example, there was one sermon series that [the minister of the church we were attending] did on the sixties. He was talking about the sixties as a cultural turning point, and it was just very clear through all that, that essentially it was a culture war sort of statement that says, ‘this is where American culture turned the corner and became un-amenable to Christian faith and we need to be aware of this and vigilant about it’.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶¹ Charles, turn 36.

⁵⁶² Charles, turn 36.

⁵⁶³ Charles, turn 36.

⁵⁶⁴ Charles, turn 36.

⁵⁶⁵ Charles, turn 42.

⁵⁶⁶ Charles, turn 42.

By the time Charles move to the Springfield area to continue postgraduate studies, he and his partner, ‘were so frustrated’ with their previous experiences of church, and were ‘looking for something new’.⁵⁶⁷ Realizing that their current ecclesial situation was ‘not working’, Charles sensed that he and his partner needed ‘to find some sort of a church that we can deal with, or we’re just... it’s not going to... faith needs to work for us. We think it’s really important, but we have to find a church in which this will work’.⁵⁶⁸ Having heard of emerging church through various lectures at his university, and through texts he was reading, Charles ‘was pleased, and surprised in a way, to find that there was this sort of emergent community in Springfield’, and he began participating in *Common Table* after moving to this city.⁵⁶⁹

Shortly after getting involved in this emerging community, Charles made a meaningful connection with the participants of *Common Table*—both relationally and intellectually. Relationally, Charles found the community to be a place where, ‘everybody throws their cards on the table, and you know each other and you know what it is that your struggles are and you know what kind of person... I mean, you know people extremely well’.⁵⁷⁰ According to Charles, these relationships ‘tie us deeply to the community’, and form the ‘primary connection to that community—above and beyond my connection to whatever its structure is’.⁵⁷¹ In addition to these relational connections, Charles also found the intellectual environment at *Common Table* meaningful. Noting that he had ‘entered this sort of secular academic world’, where he was ‘encountering a lot of new ideas, and for the first time probably really facing up to a lot of intellectual arguments’, Charles said:

So I was facing a lot of intellectual discourse that I felt faith should apply to, but I didn’t feel as if I had yet participated in a faith tradition that really took that engagement seriously. So, finding *Common Table* as a place where I felt it was OK to ask essentially any question that you had, and OK to engage in that dialogue—not just within, you know, ‘these are the voices and the scholars that are OK to engage with’, but to move outside of that and sort of really be open about how

⁵⁶⁷ Charles, turn 60.

⁵⁶⁸ Charles, turn 60.

⁵⁶⁹ Charles, turn 60.

⁵⁷⁰ Charles, turn 30.

⁵⁷¹ Charles, turn 30.

faith applies to my academic discipline, and other disciplines, and theology and life and science, or whatever, and have it all on the table I think was really important.⁵⁷²

As a result of these meaningful connections and conversations, Charles experienced a swift bond with this community, and ‘after a month or two’, and after he and his partner had ‘gotten to know people and gotten connected’, he said that he ‘couldn’t see being anywhere else’.⁵⁷³

Common Table Participant – Joe

Joe (32) was entering his fourth year with the community, and at the time of our interview he was ‘in the process of pursuing [ordination]’.⁵⁷⁴ Although not yet ordained by this emerging church, he served as a co-minister in the *Common Table* community. In this capacity, Joe focused his attention on the theological conversations that took place in the community. Describing his responsibilities, he commented:

There are several different facets of my involvement. One is to act in a theological role—so trying to find things, locate things, push the kind of theological discourse that happens in our community. Primarily that takes place through a pub group that I lead on Thursday nights—so sending out articles, finding stuff for us to read together, leading that discussion that facilitates kind of theological questioning and kind of issues that are contemporary. It might be politics, it might be race relations, it might be gender, sexuality questions, all the things that a normal church would be—I think—talking about, even if it's not publicly. So, trying to kind of push the theological discourse of our community and really get us reading together, thinking together.⁵⁷⁵

In addition to facilitating the theological dialogue in the community, Joe also had a role in the Sunday evening worship gatherings, where he would frequently lead the community in the Eucharist celebration. He would also occasionally lead the dialogue portion of the liturgy. Finally, Joe served as the formal liaison between the *Common Table* community and the *Our City Care* organization.

⁵⁷² Charles, turn 40.

⁵⁷³ Charles, turn 60.

⁵⁷⁴ Joe, interview by author, Springfield, 13 July 2009, Joe transcript, turn 22.

⁵⁷⁵ Joe, turn 12.

Joe's father was a minister, and his parents were 'very involved in the church', so Joe considers himself to have, 'always been involved in church'.⁵⁷⁶ Growing up, his family belonged to a 'very conservative' Independent Baptist church. Joe remarks that he 'participated in Sunday school, Wednesday night services, youth groups—all growing up'.⁵⁷⁷ After leaving for university, Joe said he 'participated loosely in church, not nearly as much as I had prior to that in my life'.⁵⁷⁸ According to Joe, this sporadic participation was due to the fact that, 'I was wrestling with my conservative upbringing'.⁵⁷⁹ He narrated through this crucial period, commenting:

I just went through a phase where a lot of the questions that I had, there wasn't space in the communities that I knew to pursue those questions. And some of it probably was just college laziness... but I think the larger part of it was wrestling through some questions from—I was a philosophy major, so encountering philosophers and their questions and reading novels and everything from Dostoyevsky to Sartre and different thinks like that, that pushed me to ask questions that it didn't feel to me my church had given sufficient answers to, even if they knew that those questions existed... a lot of times it was just the kind of, 'we're going to close our eyes to the world and just act like this is the only way it is, and there's nothing else going on', and to even ask the questions would be an act of infidelity almost. So I think whether this was good or not, the way that it played out for me what that I just had to have some time to sort through some stuff on my own—I guess not completely on my own, but with a smaller group of friends as opposed to an entire church.⁵⁸⁰

After graduating from college, Joe began giving serious thought to his vocation and chose to attend divinity school. While there, his church involvement centred around field education and placements, and so for him, 'there wasn't a lot of thought given to the structure of the church or what type of church I'm going to be participating in necessarily'.⁵⁸¹ Following divinity school, Joe became actively involved in an Episcopal Church because he 'loved the liturgy' of the church.⁵⁸² Indeed, according

⁵⁷⁶ Joe, turn 28.

⁵⁷⁷ Joe, turn 28.

⁵⁷⁸ Joe, turn 28.

⁵⁷⁹ Joe, turn 30.

⁵⁸⁰ Joe, turn 30.

⁵⁸¹ Joe, turn 32.

⁵⁸² Joe, turn 32.

to him, ‘I loved a lot of the things that the church was doing, a lot of the ways that it thought about how it sees itself as an active entity in the world’.⁵⁸³ Still, Joe did not feel at home in this expression of church, and this led him to seek a way back into the evangelical tradition and brought him into conversation with the *Common Table* community as it was emerging. He explained:

[The Episcopal Church] is not how I grew up, it's not what formed me, it's not what gave birth to my Christian faith, so I found myself saying, ‘I need to find a way to come back to an evangelical community’—not sure that I wanted to do that, but I figured I'd give it a try. So at that point I started looking at some of the churches that fit that mode in this area—went to *Shelbyville Community Church*, which was right at about the same time that Mike was beginning *Common Table*. So, I started having conversations with him while I was getting involved with ministries at *Shelbyville Community Church*, and eventually—once we leapt out and started doing this [emerging church]—I went along with that.⁵⁸⁴

Since aligning himself with this community, Joe has found *Common Table* to be ‘a place where the conversations could be had’.⁵⁸⁵ He has found it particularly meaningful that, ‘the tough conversations of everything from sexuality, to race, to doctrinal discussions were not just automatically slammed shut by some decisions that had been made by who knows who’, but rather these matters, ‘could be open to the community to discuss and think through’.⁵⁸⁶ In addition to this, Joe has also appreciated the social engagement he has experienced at *Common Table*, noting that this emerging church has ‘a more active sense of missional participation in the local community—getting involved in owning the city that we find ourselves in, finding where God is working, what needs to be done’.⁵⁸⁷ Noting that this social engagement is not unique to *Common Table*, Joe maintained that, ‘this was a place that I found that really allowed me to do that—pushed me to do that—and thought of itself directly as a church that was going to do that’.⁵⁸⁸

⁵⁸³ Joe, turn 32.

⁵⁸⁴ Joe, turn 32.

⁵⁸⁵ Joe, turn 34.

⁵⁸⁶ Joe, turn 34.

⁵⁸⁷ Joe, turn 34.

⁵⁸⁸ Joe, turn 34.

Common Table Participant – Kimberly

Similar to Joe, Kimberly (32) started participating with the *Common Table* community in its early days. She remarked, ‘I started going when they were meeting in the living room [of one of the principal families]’.⁵⁸⁹ She is designated as a ‘lay leader’ in the community—an ‘awkward’ title that Kimberly is not altogether comfortable with, because she believes it to be ‘an old term that we don’t use a whole lot in today’s language’.⁵⁹⁰ Describing her responsibilities as lay leader, Kimberly suggests that it is ‘really more of a project manager or an administrator kind of role’, where she will ‘run the leadership team’ and ‘try to kind of keep things running smoothly from an administrative perspective’, in order for other members of the lead team to focus on ‘pastoring and ministering’.⁵⁹¹

Kimberly was raised in a Presbyterian church in the town of Springfield. This particular community belonged to the *Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, and located itself within the evangelical stream of that denomination. According to Kimberly, this congregation drew ‘a lot of people from really broad denominational backgrounds’, and thus she did not consider herself ‘a dyed in the wool Presbyterian’ until she went to an evangelical Christian university.⁵⁹² It was through interacting with individuals from other traditions at university that Kimberly realized the Presbyterian nature of her faith.⁵⁹³ Returning to the Springfield area after university, she ‘ended up going to *Shelbyville Community Church* for a few years’.⁵⁹⁴ It was there that she became involved in the young adult ministry and met Mike—who was leading this ministry at that time. Kimberly joined with the group of initial participants that emerged to form *Common Table*, but as indicated in the above section on the history and development of this community, she still continued her involvement with *Shelbyville Community Church*. Noting that she ‘double-dipped for a year or so’, Kimberly ‘finally got overwhelmed’ with being involved in both

⁵⁸⁹ Kimberly, turn 4.

⁵⁹⁰ Kimberly, turn 10.

⁵⁹¹ Kimberly, turn 8.

⁵⁹² Kimberly, turn 26.

⁵⁹³ Kimberly, turn 26.

⁵⁹⁴ Kimberly, turn 28.

communities, and needing to make a commitment to one or the other, ‘ended up at *Common Table*’.⁵⁹⁵

Recognizing the distinct nature of her own story of emergence, Kimberly stressed that she was ‘not one of the people who grew up in a really, really, strict conservative background that needed to just chuck everything and start over again’.⁵⁹⁶ Instead, she saw her emergence as a process of maturation and culmination. Suggesting that she was drawn to this community by ‘some of the ideals that they wanted to pursue’, such as ‘the kingdom of God and what it means to be part of the kingdom of God here’, Kimberly noted how these ideals were perhaps present, but undeveloped, in her previous experiences of church. She commented:

A lot of social justice issues that scripture talks about—[those were] never really emphasized when I was growing up. I mean, I think I learned those things and a lot of seeds were planted as I was growing up... I feel like *Common Table* is more of a continuation, or growth in some of those things that I really wanted to explore.⁵⁹⁷

Getting to explore and develop those different areas has been a meaningful aspect of Kimberly’s involvement in this emerging church. Speaking about what she found significant in her experiences within the *Common Table* community, she noted that, ‘maybe the most significant thing has been looking at scripture—I don’t want to say in an entirely differently way than I was taught growing up, but I would definitely say that some of the themes that are emphasized are different’.⁵⁹⁸ For instance, Kimberly commented how, ‘we talk a lot about suffering at *Common Table*, and about the fact that we’re not promised that everything is going to be just great because we’re followers of Christ’.⁵⁹⁹ She went on to say that this is, ‘a very different message—I think—than a lot of churches preach’.⁶⁰⁰ Kimberly found ‘a lot of hope’ in this different message, because it allowed her to ‘step out of more of the traditional evangelical mindset’—which she believed focused on being successful in

⁵⁹⁵ Kimberly, turn 28.

⁵⁹⁶ Kimberly, turn 30.

⁵⁹⁷ Kimberly, turn 30.

⁵⁹⁸ Kimberly, turn 74.

⁵⁹⁹ Kimberly, turn 74.

⁶⁰⁰ Kimberly, turn 74.

one's work and family life—and enabled her to place her 'finger on the pulse of where God is really working, instead of striving for the American dream'.⁶⁰¹ She continued by saying, 'the kingdom of God is really the most important thing', and 'that's what I want to aspire to'.⁶⁰² While Kimberly also remarked that she found *Common Table's* informality and the musical portions of the liturgy meaningful, she continued to focus on how being a part this emerging community provided her with a constant reminder about the importance of finding where God is working. She noted, 'I guess for me, and where I am in my life right now, that's more important than going through a list of what's right behaviour for a Christian'.⁶⁰³

Common Table Participant – Gordon

As noted in the above description of the *Common Table* worship gatherings, Gordon (44) was a more recent participant in this emerging church, having just started attending this community six month prior to our interview. As a newer participant, Gordon had no formal role with *Common Table*.

He 'grew up in a Pentecostal church—predominately *Assemblies of God*', and as a layperson, was deeply involved in the leadership structures of this denomination.⁶⁰⁴ Gordon's leadership involvement began at the local level, where as a teenager he 'began to work in children's ministry' at the church he was attending.⁶⁰⁵ This involvement in children's ministry would continue 'for almost thirty years' at various local churches, and expanded to include serving 'on regional organizational levels for the denomination'.⁶⁰⁶ Although these local communities were located within the Pentecostal stream, Gordon noted their variances, saying 'I got sent to a lot of different places, and it might be in a little country church where the hymns were from sometime in the 1800s, and the next church over has drums and electric guitars'.⁶⁰⁷ As for his involvement with these churches, Gordon commented that, 'on

⁶⁰¹ Kimberly, turn 74.

⁶⁰² Kimberly, turn 74.

⁶⁰³ Kimberly, turn 74.

⁶⁰⁴ Gordon, turn 30.

⁶⁰⁵ Gordon, turn 30.

⁶⁰⁶ Gordon, turn 30.

⁶⁰⁷ Gordon, turn 46.

a scale of one to ten—I was ten. I was maxed out. I would spend thirty, forty hours a week doing church work’.⁶⁰⁸

Gordon suggested that the work he was involved in was an ‘amazing ministry’, which sought to ‘get the church out of their mindset of running programs and running through curriculum, and get them more into a real ministry mindset of love—an unconditional love’.⁶⁰⁹ Even though Gordon, ‘believed that God was in it’, he found this type of ministry to be a ‘tough thing to do because it’s easier to run the program’.⁶¹⁰ He explained:

You can't go off to work everyday and get all mad and angry and caught up in work, and suddenly just switch gears and say, ‘Oh, now I'm going to run a loving ministry’. You can run a program that way, but you can't do... that was basically what our job was—in leadership at the local and regional levels—was to try and encourage the local leaders through just love and helping them.⁶¹¹

Beyond the challenges he faced in transitioning his church away from program and curriculum based ministries, Gordon also feared that his professional work was becoming an issue within both his denomination and his local church community. After making the comment that ‘most Pentecostal churches have certain aversions to modern science’, Gordon revealed that, ‘I happen to be scientist’.⁶¹² Realizing that the work he was doing ‘would have caused problems in the church body’, he sensed the need ‘to start training in some people’ who could replace him at the local level, and then he ‘left that church’.⁶¹³ Gordon suggested that ‘it worked out very well’, because, in his account, ‘I was able to train in the people I needed to, leave, and then do what I need to scientifically—and the funny thing is, what's a stumbling block to one group is a witness to another group’.⁶¹⁴

⁶⁰⁸ Gordon, turn 30.

⁶⁰⁹ Gordon, turn 34.

⁶¹⁰ Gordon, turns, 32, 34.

⁶¹¹ Gordon, turn 34.

⁶¹² Gordon, turn 44.

⁶¹³ Gordon, turn 44.

⁶¹⁴ Gordon, turn 44.

When Gordon left his *Assemblies of God* congregation, he began participating with the *Common Table* community. Recognizing the disparate nature of his own ecclesial and vocational background, Gordon came to this emerging church with a number of questions. In an early conversation with Mike about *Common Table*, Gordon recalled asking, ‘is it OK to be Pentecostal there?’⁶¹⁵ Assuring Mike that he was ‘not going to start yelling and jumping over pews’, Gordon also wanted to know, ‘at the same time, is it OK to be an evolutionary biologist?’⁶¹⁶ After confirming with Mike that the *Common Table* community would be ‘fine with both of those’, Gordon settled into the community, and quickly became a very active participant.⁶¹⁷ As a participant, Gordon developed a deep appreciation for the freedom he found in this emerging church. The weekly pub group was particularly meaningful to Gordon, and when asked what he found most significant about his involvement at *Common Table*, he responded:

For me, it's going to a group where you can drink beer while you're doing a church function, because the background that I'm from is so legalistic. While I was in that background, to me it wasn't legalism, it was something that I knew God had called me to do, but then when he gives you freedom so you don't have to do those things anymore, then you can enjoy that freedom... but I enjoy not having to do... follow all those rules. So, one of the most significant, fun things is to sit and have a beer with a bunch of fellow believers. And that's just me personally. For most people that would—or for many people I suspect—that's a silly thing.⁶¹⁸

Gordon recognized how those from his previous ecclesial tradition could be ‘leery of Common Table’.⁶¹⁹ He suggested that ‘those communities are generally very dogma and doctrinally driven in terms of their organization and how they define members and how they define people who are in good standing with the community’.⁶²⁰ Still, Gordon was hopeful that these communities, ‘would see Christ moving through

⁶¹⁵ Gordon, turn 46.

⁶¹⁶ Gordon, turn 46.

⁶¹⁷ Gordon, turn 46.

⁶¹⁸ Gordon, turn 94.

⁶¹⁹ Gordon, turn 144.

⁶²⁰ Gordon, turn 144.

Common Table in a very real and tangible way, and recognize that they didn't need to be quite so leery of them'.⁶²¹

Patterns of Emergence

The accounts of emergence given above provide an indicative description of the profiles and narratives of those participating in the *Common Table* community. Similar to the accounts given in the *Novitas* community, these narratives reveal certain patterns, which give insight into the ecclesial backgrounds of *Common Table* participants, their frustrations with churches they are emerging from, the desires driving their emergence, and how these desires are met by their experiences in this emerging community.

Although not every community participant emerged from *Shelbyville Community Church*, many of the above interviewees did spend some time in this congregation. Whether they were involved with the Shelbyville community or not, participants consistently noted the conservative, evangelical, or fundamentalist nature of their ecclesial backgrounds—with several interviewees drawing attention to how the conservative doctrine of these churches served as boundaries one needed to cross for inclusion. In revealing their frustrations with their previous exposure to church, participants highlighted a range of issues, from the limited and insular nature of the conservative doctrines and the lack of intellectual engagement they experienced in these communities, to the programmatic approach to ministry found in these churches. Participants in the larger churches were also frustrated with the relational isolation they experienced in these communities. As participants emerged, they sought a community that was open to questions, and where they could explore theology together. They desired a place that integrated their intellectual lives with their faith. They also desired a place to form meaningful connections with one another and with their local community through social activity—connecting this activity back to an understanding of the gospel that moved beyond the narrow way it was portrayed in their previous churches. In *Common Table*, these participants found a community where intellectual and theological conversations were welcomed, and meaningful relational connections developed as they lived and conceived faith

⁶²¹ Gordon, turn 144.

together—looking at scriptures in a way that moved beyond ‘the traditional evangelical mindset’, and actively engaging in local social activity. Finally, the Eucharist celebration, *Common Table* liturgy, and church calendar were also meaningful to participants, serving to deepen the bonds with one another and with the wider Christian community.

Findings from the Common Table Community

Having completed the overview of the *Common Table* community, I now turn my focus towards drawing out the findings through a detailed presentation of the noteworthy features and themes that surfaced during my fieldwork in Springfield. In a manner similar to the previous chapter, the initial segment of this presentation arranges the data in a narrative form—allowing for the particulars that I observed through participation and the voices that I interacted with through interviews to shape the overall structure of this material. The second segment is a presentation of the focus group schedule that was used to validate my arrangement of the data in this manner.

Features and Themes

While I did experience a brief amount of contact with *Common Table* through phone conversations, email communications and internet-based investigations prior to arriving in Springfield, my full participation with this emerging church began on a Sunday evening at one of the weekly gatherings of the community.

Eucharist Celebration

As already noted above, one of the more striking features to surface from these nights was the exceptional manner in which the community celebrated the Eucharist, and therefore reflecting upon this ritual took up a noticeable portion of my early field note entries. In addition, discussions surrounding the practice and nature of the Eucharist celebration received substantial attention in my interview encounters with the participants—with all but one interviewee engaging in extended commentary on

the meaning and significance of this ritual in the life of the community.⁶²² For instance, Joe, who frequently led the Eucharist celebration during the liturgical gatherings of *Common Table*, commented on the pivotal nature of this practice—stressing the important role that it played in the community and in his own spiritual formation. Speaking first of the robust social dimensions brought out through the community’s particular enactment of this ritual, Joe remarked:

So eating together is a central practice of the church. Breaking bread together is an essential practice of the church because it is a place where I don't get to pick who stands next to me in line. I don't get to pick who gives me the bread, who serves me the cup. I don't get to pick the community that God has chosen. I learn to receive the grace from God in this act and it is formative for the rest of my life.⁶²³

Moreover, Joe’s learning ‘to receive the grace from God in this act’ represented another influential dimension of the ritual for him that further solidified its significance in his life. Recalling past ecclesial settings, Joe stated, ‘my experience had been solely, “if you're not right with God”—and that had very specific connotations—“then you need to get right with God or else you're on the outsides of the church”’.⁶²⁴ Yet, for Joe, this former understanding posed a burdensome predicament because, as he laughingly explained, ‘the problem for me was that I just couldn't get right with God’.⁶²⁵ Consequently, Eucharist celebration has become an indispensable element for Joe as he navigates the blurred regions between faith and doubt. He explained:

The Eucharist to me is particularly special—at a very personal level—because it is the place where God makes me right with God, without me having to do it. Do you know what I mean? And makes me right even when I don't believe him. So I think there's a certain love that I have for the table in that way.⁶²⁶

⁶²² Gordon was the only *Common Table* interviewee who did not elaborate upon this ritual. Yet, even he singled out this practice when describing a Sunday night gathering by saying, ‘I love the way they do communion. It's not a formality so much as it is a communion... we get up and we share bread and wine, and it's sort of a free-for-all. Everybody is talking about how they've been, what they're doing, and at the same time we're remembering what Christ has done for us through the ceremony of communion.’ Gordon, turns 84, 86.

⁶²³ Joe, turn 50.

⁶²⁴ Joe, turn 74.

⁶²⁵ Joe, turn 74.

⁶²⁶ Joe, turn 74.

In the interview, Joe acknowledged the influence of Catholic novelists—such as Graham Greene and Flannery O'Connor—on his understanding of Eucharistic practices, and suggested that, ‘part of what I was really attracted to was their ability to engage a lot of large questions’, and ‘what I saw in them was that they were allowed to go through times of strong questioning—even disbelief—because at the end of the day they could still take the Eucharist.’⁶²⁷

While Joe frequently articulated these perspectives of the Eucharist on behalf of (and to) the community during the Sunday evening gatherings, not all of the *Common Table* participants were similarly shaped by this ritual. For instance, Charles admitted in an interview that the weekly occurrence of the Eucharist celebration—as well as the emphasis that it received in the liturgy—required some time for him to appreciate. He remarked, ‘I think that's a lot different for us—communion being this sort of centre of the service and we sort of drive towards communion and you have this musical preparation for communion’, adding that, ‘I think that's still something I'm trying to kind of acclimate to.’⁶²⁸ Even though Charles acknowledged that the Eucharist celebration was ‘really meaningful in terms of the narrative it puts across’, ultimately he declared, ‘I guess in terms of felt experience, sometimes I'm like, “oh, it's communion”, you know, “that's wine and crackers”.’⁶²⁹ Recognizing that his ambivalence toward this ritual was brought about ‘because I'm probably used to sort of deemphasizing that’, Charles concluded his commentary on *Common Table's* Eucharist celebration by saying that he was ‘still working into that’.⁶³⁰

Other participants, while appreciating the emphasis upon the weekly Eucharist celebration, expressed a desire to occasionally deviate from the community's customary enactment. In an interview Kimberly shared, ‘sometimes I wish that we could be more varied in how we do celebrate communion’, adding that she would welcome a ‘more contemplative communion some weeks.’⁶³¹ Indeed, a noticeable

⁶²⁷ Joe, turn 74.

⁶²⁸ Charles, turn 90.

⁶²⁹ Charles, turn 90.

⁶³⁰ Charles, turn 90.

⁶³¹ Kimberly, turn 84.

feature of the *Common Table* worship gatherings was the strong verbal orientation of this community. Whether it was spoken words guiding the community through the greeting, scriptures reading and conversation portions of the liturgy, or sung words guiding the community through the call to gather, preparation, confession, absolution and benediction portions of the liturgy, a perceptible dearth of verbal silence marked the Sunday evening gatherings. Furthermore, due to the unique manner in which the *Common Table* community celebrated the Eucharist, this shortage of verbal silence persisted during their more socially oriented communion practice. Heather articulated her ambivalence towards the way this ritual was enacted at *Common Table* by pointing out:

I wish there was more time for silence and contemplation and kind of the being still. It's... I understand the idea behind how we do communion in that it's a feast and a celebration and it's the coming together, so we need to be sharing stories. But especially this past year, when it was just tough for me, I sometimes felt like I don't want to make the small talk conversation. I need to be quiet and just kind of let some of these things sink in, because between the music and the dialogue, a lot is being said, and there's not a lot of time to chew on it and reflect on that. And there's also not a lot of time to just kind of stop and breathe and rest.⁶³²

Yet despite the unfamiliar nature of this ritual for some, or the non-contemplative aspects of it for others, the unique practice and weekly liturgical emphasis that the Eucharist received in the gatherings still managed to provide acute meaning for many of the participants—including Heather, whose repeated emphasis on this time during her interview served to illustrate just how profound the ritual was. Of particular note, when I asked Heather about the most significant practice of the community for her, she spoke candidly, describing the importance she saw in weekly confession, absolution and communion:

You know, when I was growing up we did communion once a month and you would have the reading / the scripture of the story, but it wasn't as clear of a confession and absolution. And for me, that weekly... you know, I was pretty good about confessing before, but not with other people necessarily. And so during the week there's that, like, reminder of, 'oh, this was confessed and I received absolution', and that's meant... that's been a tremendous thing to me.⁶³³

⁶³² Heather, turn 44.

⁶³³ Heather, turn 56.

As the *Common Table* community celebrated the Eucharist, stress was placed upon community formation. Notions of sharing, egalitarianism and unity took precedence as they acted out these ideals through the communion meal—sometimes even explicitly referring to the Eucharist as ‘a performance’. The atmosphere during this extended time at the table was difficult to discern. It was neither solemn nor irreverent. While it was not weighed down with excessive sentiment, neither was it lacking in significance or meaning. The stressed importance of this act by the emphasis it received in the liturgy had notes of what might be labelled ‘high church worship’, yet the fact that the elements were not consecrated and were causally consumed, gave sounds of a more ‘low church’ communion practice. Still, because of the notable meaning assigned to the Eucharist celebration by the worshipping participants and its place in the community’s liturgy, it surfaced as a central feature of this community.

Academic Affiliation

In addition to the *Common Table* community’s exceptional Eucharistic ritual, a second noteworthy feature promptly materialized during my participation with this emerging church, which had a great effect on the themes that surfaced in my research. During my initial encounters, I quickly noticed that a high percentage of the community participants were affiliated with the academy in some form. In fact, as I reflected upon my first engagement with the *Common Table* community, I calculated that five of the first nine individuals I met on that initial Sunday evening were either currently engaged in postgraduate study or worked at a local university as a member of faculty.⁶³⁴ Since this pattern continued in my next encounter with the community at the pub group on Thursday, I asked Joe—who was himself a postgraduate student—about this particular feature. In the conversation that followed, he acknowledged that *Common Table* was a highly educated community and many of the participants were indeed affiliated with the academy.⁶³⁵

⁶³⁴ Author’s field notes, Springfield, 3 May 2009. Due to my previous email and phone contact with Mike, the leader of the *Common Table* community, I have not included him in this calculation—although it is worth pointing out that Mike does hold a postgraduate degree.

⁶³⁵ Author’s field notes, Springfield, 7 May 2009.

When validating the presence of this feature through a discussion of it during the focus group I conducted at the end of my research in Springfield, community members also confirmed that a high percentage of *Common Table* participants were affiliated with the academy in some form.⁶³⁶ While suggesting that this has the potential to make their community harder to access if one is not academically inclined, they stressed that other churches in the area also contained a significant number of academically affiliated members. This, they presumed, was due to the high number of local research universities in the region. The community members also noted that the preponderance of academically affiliated members was not a result of some concerted effort on the part of *Common Table* to reach out to the academic community. Still, the focus group participants did acknowledge that having more academically affiliated members contributed to a culture that is seriously engaged with questions. This, along with a desire for more diversity, is explored in the following sections.

Desire for Diversity

Two additional themes surfaced during my involvement with *Common Table*—both of which relate to the fact that there was a high concentration of academically affiliated participants within this emerging church. First, there was a repeated aspiration amongst *Common Table* participants for more demographic diversity within their community. In fact, all but one interviewee expressed this desire, with most calling for more diversity along racial, socio-economic and generational lines. For instance, Heather stated in an interview that the *Common Table* community ‘doesn’t reflect the diversity that I wish it would racially’.⁶³⁷ Charles also spoke of a desire for diversity, emphasizing the importance of extending the community’s demographic beyond the graduate student population in order to ‘find ways to be more conversant with broader groups of people’.⁶³⁸ He noted that ‘our community kind of ages out at around fifty’, and so his desire for diversity ‘could be people in different careers, or different life situations, or older people’.⁶³⁹ Mike’s response to

⁶³⁶ *Common Table* participants, interview by author, Springfield, 2 August 2009, *Common Table* focus group audio, turn 12:37-19:06.

⁶³⁷ Heather, turn 36.

⁶³⁸ Charles, turn 124.

⁶³⁹ Charles, turn 124.

a probing question in an interview captured well the opinions of the other participants. When asked what—if anything—was missing from the *Common Table* community, he replied:

There's plenty of voids. I mean, we would certainly love more demographic diversity. We would love to have people who are older. I honestly think... I may not be, but I've been consistently the oldest person in the community. We would love to have greater diversity in race and ethnicities.⁶⁴⁰

Mike went on to admit that although his community partnered with a number of African-American communities in the local area, *Common Table's* 'style' and their particular theological approaches to church was a barrier for some African-American individuals and therefore limited their involvement. Still, the desire for more demographic diversity persisted within *Common Table*, and stood as a notable trait coming out of my research.

Space for Theological Exploration and Intellectual Enquiry

In addition to a desire for more diversity, a second theme relating to the high concentration of academically affiliated community members surfaced during my participation with *Common Table*—namely, the community's resolution to be a space for theological exploration and intellectual enquiry. When asked what they believed their community valued, several interviewees responded in a fashion similar to Kimberly, who suggested that her church appreciated 'entertaining other perspectives or views'.⁶⁴¹ Oftentimes, this approach would result in robust discussions around a number of subject matters that had been outside the realm of consideration for community participants in their former ecclesial contexts. Joe, when speaking about his migration from these prior contexts, described his experience of coming into this emerging church in this manner:

This was a place where, like I said, the conversations could be had. The tough conversations of everything from sexuality, to race, to doctrinal discussions were not just automatically slammed shut by some decisions that had been made by who knows who—maybe a few people who have the public eye and a couple of radio shows—but could be open to the community to discuss and think through.⁶⁴²

⁶⁴⁰ Mike, turn 54.

⁶⁴¹ Heather, turn 38.

⁶⁴² Joe, turn 34.

Charles expressed a similar experience when he spoke about what it means for him to be a part of this community. Noting the freedom he felt at *Common Table* to fully explore crucial theological questions, Charles emphasised the fact that he was permitted to, ‘ask questions that I find significant or deal with issues that I find important—without having to worry about living up to some sort of prescribed standard of what is doctrinally or behaviourally acceptable’.⁶⁴³ Sentiments such as these repeatedly surfaced in my interviews with Joe, Charles and other *Common Table* participants, and the persistent occurrence of these attitudes served to further underscore the features of intellectual enquiry and theological exploration present in this community. In order to maintain and promote a space for this type of exploration, the *Common Table* community insisted on fostering a hospitable stance towards diverse beliefs and actively engaged in the eclectic appropriation of practices from a range of ecclesial traditions. These two aspects of the community are explored further in the below sections.

Hospitable to Diverse Beliefs

When asked to consider what the *Common Table* community values, Charles remarked, ‘I think theological diversity... I think people are committed to that’.⁶⁴⁴ Noting how this commitment to theological diversity is reflected in the way in which the community allows a mix of beliefs to exist and provides space for participants to explore new theological ideas, Charles suggested that it was important for *Common Table* to allow ‘people to have the space to deal with their past, or sort through concepts, or sort through new idea’s’.⁶⁴⁵ He continued:

And having people that go to [the divinity school] with people from [conservative] backgrounds like mine, or people from more liturgical, liberal mainline backgrounds—having those people together and able to be conversant even if they’re not in agreement, I think that sort of thing is a really big deal.⁶⁴⁶

In offering an additional example of the ‘diversity of backgrounds and diversity of theological views’ in this emerging church, Charles spoke of how there were some inside the *Common Table* community who were ‘deeply ambivalent about whether or

⁶⁴³ Charles, turn 22.

⁶⁴⁴ Charles, turn 62.

⁶⁴⁵ Charles, turn 62.

⁶⁴⁶ Charles, turn 62.

not they even call themselves Christian’, and yet they amicably existed ‘alongside [and] in community with people that are pursuing—on a very organized sort of track—a religious experience’.⁶⁴⁷

In a similar manner, Gordon also emphasised how diverse theological beliefs were welcomed in this community. Speaking in reference to conversations that took place during the weekly pub group gatherings he noted, ‘I’ve seen some incredibly conservative views come out of that pub group and some incredibly liberal views—as I would classically define conservative and liberal from the background that I have. So I have been surprised.’⁶⁴⁸ To be sure, his sentiment of surprise should not be understood to apply strictly to the conservative and liberal views of the community participants. In actuality, the wider conditions that existed within *Common Table*—which allowed for these diverse views to exist alongside one another—warrant an equal measure of attention. Gordon signalled the importance of giving attention to these wider conditions when discussing the conversations in the pub group, recognizing that, ‘those debates about theology help me understand *how* the community thinks, and that’s important—that is very important.’⁶⁴⁹ In the following paragraphs, I explore *how* this community went about creating an environment that remains hospitable to diverse beliefs.

In a fashion similar to the *Novitas* Community, the participants of *Common Table* were diligent in their efforts to ensure that their weekly gatherings remained hospitable to theological discussions and intellectual enquiries. Although *Common Table* did include aspects of corporate singing in their liturgy—unlike the *Novitas* community, which avoided corporate singing altogether—the distinct manner in which this practice was implemented at *Common Table* served to underscore the community’s aspirations to be a church that remained open to a variety of theological perspectives. As indicated in the above section on the liturgical elements in worship, *Common Table* brought together songs from a wide range of sources to form their liturgy—including many songs that originated outside the Christian church. In an

⁶⁴⁷ Charles, turn 66.

⁶⁴⁸ Gordon, turn 78.

⁶⁴⁹ Gordon, turn 78. [Emphasis mine.]

interview, Mike actually made particular mention of his community's intentional strategy to include a diverse array of music in their liturgy, suggesting that 'with our music, we're connecting ourselves to a variety of streams' and we do not hold a 'sacred / secular mindset towards music and art'.⁶⁵⁰ Mike was also quick to note that they 'certainly don't have a reverse bias against the historic art of the church', which would preclude them from drawing on those streams as well. Yet, in drawing on these varieties of streams, *Common Table* regularly introduced musical elements into their liturgy that elicited reflective listening as opposed to active singing.⁶⁵¹ Indeed, much of the aim behind the selection of certain songs was to invite the community participants into a space where they could meditatively engage with the music and lyrics of these pieces, as opposed to selecting songs that would easily facilitate singing corporately. Additionally, by selecting a large number of songs from non-ecclesial streams, much of the doctrinal or confessional material present in traditional hymns was absent in the musical liturgy of this community. In an interview, Gordon demonstrated well how these aims have been realized. When asked how he would describe *Common Table* to others, he commented, 'I would explain that a lot of the service allows you to sit there and just listen'.⁶⁵² Then, in turning his focus specifically towards the musical elements of the liturgy, Gordon added, 'they're not going to tell you what to think, they're going to just let you listen for yourself. Certainly [they do] the music that way.'⁶⁵³

Other customary ecclesial activities, such as preaching, also underwent modifications at *Common Table* in an attempt to further maintain a hospitable space for theological enquiry. As already indicated in the above depiction of the *Common Table's* worship gathering, this community shied away from using words such as 'sermon' and 'preaching' to describe the portion of the liturgy set aside for engaging with scripture, opting instead for expressions such as 'conversation' and 'dialogue'. In

⁶⁵⁰ Mike, turn 48.

⁶⁵¹ Reoccurring observations throughout my earliest field note entries focused on how only a small minority of the participants actually took part in singing with the service leader—with the majority choosing instead to quietly reflect on the songs that were selected to guide the community through the liturgy. Author's field notes, Springfield, 3 May 2009, 10 May 2009, 17 May 2009, 31 May 2009, 3 June 2009.

⁶⁵² Gordon, turn 56.

⁶⁵³ Gordon, turn 56.

fact, this particular characteristic made a marked impression on Kimberly, leading her to describe it as one of the community's principal values. When discussing those things that her church most appreciated, Kimberly observed:

I think one of the values is the dialogical form of what would traditionally be a sermon in another church, and entertaining other perspectives or views. I guess kind of looking at it in terms of one person doesn't come in as the authority on scripture, but it's kind of shared learning or understanding.⁶⁵⁴

To be sure, this appreciation of dialogical interfacing did indeed encourage a noticeable degree of vocal participation from the community members and allowed for diverse perspectives to emerge. Nevertheless, while adopting surrogate terms such 'dialogue' and 'conversation' for 'preaching' did point to the value that members of *Common Table* placed upon dialogical encounters, the full actualization of these more egalitarian impulses proved difficult. For instance, when discussing the 'conversation' portion of the liturgy in an interview, Charles stated well the perspective of other participants when he commented:

I mean, it's conversational, but I don't know if it's necessarily a conversation. I mean, I appreciate that Mike does try. You know, he does a lot of talking, but he also... but I mean, he's open to other voices. If someone wanted to interrupt him and say, you know, 'I think this', then he would be open to that. But I think it does take on more of a sermon-esque.⁶⁵⁵

Even so, Charles did add that, 'there's a heck of a lot of conversation that goes on' in the worship gatherings of this community.⁶⁵⁶ Moreover, this conversation served as a crucial element in allowing for a diversity of beliefs to be present in *Common Table*—giving shape to this church's overall theological culture.

Given the mix of beliefs that were on display in this emerging community, I found myself quickly agreeing with Kimberly, who commented in an interview that, 'sometimes it gets a little confusing because we all believe different things'.⁶⁵⁷ Still, when probing deeper into data generated through interviews and field notes,

⁶⁵⁴ Kimberly, turn 38.

⁶⁵⁵ Charles, turn 90.

⁶⁵⁶ Charles, turn 90.

⁶⁵⁷ Kimberly, turn 104.

important motifs began to surface—giving me the opportunity to see through the initial confusion brought about by the presence of a diversity of belief and into several of the underlying dynamics that gave direction to the diverse beliefs in this community. In the remainder of this section, I describe these dynamics, looking first at the central theological focus of this community, and then looking at the community dynamics that allowed for the privileging of the voices of some participants over the voices of others.

In interviews, participants suggested that there was not an ‘official’ doctrinal stance for community members to affirm, and as Kimberly noted, ‘a big part of *Common Table* is you don’t have to agree to a certain doctrine to be a member’.⁶⁵⁸ Joe also confirmed this in an interview, asking, ‘is there a doctrinal, kind of cognitive conclusion that they have to have reached before they can participate in the life of the community’, to which he responded, ‘No’. Still, there was a clear Christological focus in this community—with many participants finding particular meaning in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. For instance, when I asked Joe if anyone would be excluded from participating in *Common Table* based upon what they believed, his response indicated how, in allowing for a diversity of belief to exist, this Christological focus served as a shaping force in this community:

I mean our sense has always been that if the congregation continues to focus its life around the life, death and resurrection of Christ, that... you know, it's kind of a—I don't want to say a war of attrition—but if you don't believe in those things, it's going to become pretty annoying to hear them spoken about. Do you know what I mean? So, I don't really see that as something where we have to go around policing the borders, because, you know, hopefully it will be convincing at some point—just like it was for all of us.⁶⁵⁹

Consequently, for Joe it was important that *Common Table* be clearly centred on the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Still, as he pointed out, there were even on-going discussions in the community around how exactly to interpret those events. In the same interview, after stating that any theological reflection must begin from these central events, Joe continued, ‘and you know, even the life, death and resurrection I’m not saying are not open to conversation and what that means and how we

⁶⁵⁸ Kimberly, turn 104.

⁶⁵⁹ Joe, turn 88.

understand that'.⁶⁶⁰ Thus, even though Joe as an individual within the community was intent on eschewing certain understandings of Christ's resurrection that he believed undermined the power of a church's mission, he nevertheless recognized the presence of alternative interpretations in the community. Continuing to speak about the life, death and resurrection of Christ, Joe clarified:

I think that that is foundational to Christian life. So, without those, it doesn't really make a lot of sense if you say, 'well, Jesus really wasn't a person'; 'there's really not such a thing as a resurrection'; or 'it's kind of a metaphorical interpretation'. I would say at that point... you know, it's not that... I mean, there are people in our church who would offer those as questions, and I think, yeah we can continue to engage those. But to some extent I think that if the church takes that stand—for all intents and purposes and practices—you pretty much cease to be a church that has any real power whatsoever because there's not... there's nothing new in the world, right.⁶⁶¹

Joe's assertion that there were indeed those belonging to *Common Table* who would question certain aspect of Christ's resurrection can be substantiated by data generated through interviews with other participants. In particular, Charles, who after disclosing how the humanity, divinity and resurrection of Christ were central elements of his own faith, went on to share:

That doesn't mean that I won't question them. That doesn't mean that I won't look at Christ's resurrection and say: 'how did that resurrection happen? Was that a physical resurrection of his body? Was it a ghostly type thing? What was it?' I'll have those conversations, but I will come from the standpoint that yes Christ did rise from the dead. How that happened, I don't know.⁶⁶²

Thus, even though there were no set parameters for what one must or must not believe in order to be an active participate in the *Common Table* community, the Christological focus of this emerging church served to give direction to the diverse beliefs that were present. Centring the community's discourse around the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—even if the particulars of those aspects were questioned by some members of the community—brought focus to the diverse beliefs present, and served as a way of confining the conversations to a Christian context—without community members having to 'police the borders'.

⁶⁶⁰ Joe, turn 76.

⁶⁶¹ Joe, turn 76.

⁶⁶² Charles, interview by author, Springfield, 10 July 2009, Charles transcript, turn 122.

A second feature that served to direct the diverse beliefs present in this community was the privileging of some voices over the voices of others. In particular, the voices of community leaders exercised a greater influence on the community than did the voices of non-leaders. From Mike's perspective, the reality of his influence as a leader in *Common Table* can be attributed to his early role in drawing the community together. When he was asked the question of what determined the beliefs of his community, Mike stated:

De facto it probably started with me—like a lot of church plants. Not that there weren't other beliefs, but I had more of a dominant voice, which inevitably is going to create somewhat of a selective audience. You know, people are going to leave or not come based on something you may say or not say. It is certainly me plus now.⁶⁶³

Charles also recognized the influence that Mike had in the shaping of the various beliefs in this community, remarking, 'I mean, for whatever we talk about levelling discourse, [Mike] is a big voice in terms of applying vision, and he's also a person who was there from the emerging thing in the beginning'.⁶⁶⁴ Furthermore, even though more voices have joined Mike's, creating a 'me plus' dynamic, this still privileged some voices over others in the community—giving direction to the mix of beliefs that were present. Joe, a member of *Common Table* who possessed a high degree of influence in his community, spoke candidly about this in my interview with him. While discussing the topic of what determined the beliefs of *Common Table*, Joe first remarked that it was 'the congregation', but then quickly added, 'I mean, you know, it's the same as anything. Obviously there are few of us who have more than our fair say of the way in which the community's beliefs play out.'⁶⁶⁵ Acknowledging that there will be 'lively discussion' around how those beliefs mix within the community, Joe continued to address the way in which congregational leaders exercise a higher degree of leverage:

But, you know, to say that there are leadership roles in the congregation where those people typically have more say. You know, so the crafting of the liturgy, what liturgies we use, how we articulate the table, how we articulate the gospel, there are people who, through their roles in preaching and through their roles in setting up the liturgy

⁶⁶³ Mike, turn 98.

⁶⁶⁴ Charles, turn 64.

⁶⁶⁵ Joe, turn 82.

have more say in that than other people in the congregation. But we would like to think that all the congregation is involved.’⁶⁶⁶

To be sure, through the dialogue portion of the worship gatherings, and through pub group and home group discussions, *Common Table* participants were indeed actively involved in shaping the beliefs of this emerging church. Yet, there were those with certain responsibilities within the community that exercised a greater influence. When considering the voices that were privileged in this emerging church, it is significant to note that many of the community leaders, such as Mike, Joshua, and Joe were either ordained or going through the ordination process. When I asked Joe what ordination means for this more egalitarian community, he responded:

It would just mean naming and kind of placing hands on the ministers, and the congregation to say... that's where the more specific role of being someone who helps to think and guide the church through the specific service to other people and of the word and of communion to the community as well... In our church those are things that are a way of naming a specific role without saying, ‘this is the only person that can do that role’. It's to name more so, ‘this is a person that we think has recognized gifts for church leadership’, but that's not to say that only ordained ministers can serve the table; only ordained ministers can preach. Obviously those lines are not nearly as rigid in our congregation as they might be in some other, more high church, congregations.⁶⁶⁷

Consequently, even though the lines between the ordained and lay members in this community were not rigid, there was a correlation between ordination and influence. Thus, while *Common Table* welcomed a diversity of belief in their community—even remaining hospitable to voices of unbelief—the participants who exercised a greater influence on the community were distinctly Christian, and thus the community itself maintained a clearly Christian orientation.

Eclectic Appropriation

In addition to remaining hospitable to diverse beliefs, another way this community maintained and promoted a space for theological exploration was through an eclectic appropriation of practices from a range of ecclesial traditions. The above overview of the *Common Table* community describes the way in which this community

⁶⁶⁶ Joe, turn 82.

⁶⁶⁷ Joe, turn 24.

observed the seasons of the liturgical year, used set lectionary texts for their worship gatherings, and incorporated elements such as the Eucharistic liturgy from the *Book of Common Prayer*—blending these practices with folk music, hymns, praise and worship songs, and spirituals. An even clearer example of appropriation can be seen in the *Minister's liturgy* developed by this emerging community. As already noted in the above section on Liturgical Elements in Worship, the Minister's Liturgy was designed as an induction ceremony for those wishing to make more formal alliances with *Common Table*. This locally developed liturgy represents an amalgamation of a number of ordination rites and ceremonies from diverse traditions. Joe explains the formation of this specific liturgy, saying:

So we went through, culled liturgies from *The Book of Common Prayer*, *The Methodist Book of Worship*, *Baptist Hymnals*, pulled together some of the ordination liturgies and some other stuff that we brought in from our own kind of experience and intuition, and crafted a minister's liturgy... where we, through the act of proclaiming to the community and with the community our desire to serve and work here, are named co-ministers in the church.⁶⁶⁸

By drawing on elements from other traditions in order to employ them in the shaping their own liturgy, the *Common Table* community further cultivated their deep appreciation for theological exploration. In addition to fostering their commitment to theological exploration, the appropriation of these elements also serves to connect this emerging community to the wider Christian community. When asked about how *Common Table* is connected to the wider church, Mike explained:

I see emerging churches do this very differently. For us, a lot of it is an excited commitment to liturgy—that we're interested in the historic words and works of the church... whether it's prayer or other liturgical forms, that is a connection point. We always preach the lectionary at least a third of the year, so there's always that connectedness of being in the same text as the church worldwide.⁶⁶⁹

Still, as Mike indicated, the *Common Table* community did not always follow the lectionary and would actually blend their use of the lectionary with occasionally doing thematic series 'that have had significant interest to our community'.⁶⁷⁰ Indeed, as noted in the above section on the community conversations during

⁶⁶⁸ Joe, turn 22.

⁶⁶⁹ Mike, turn 44.

⁶⁷⁰ Mike, turn 46.

worship, while I was participating with this emerging church, they began a thematic series focused on ‘sequel’ texts such as *Second Peter* and *Second Thessalonians*.

Given *Common Table*’s custom of incorporating elements from other traditions in their liturgy, I asked interviewees if there were any practices in the traditional or institutional way of being church that would be avoided in their community. Mike’s response was particularly perceptive, demonstrating the impracticality of attempting to catalogue the various practices not appropriated by this community. He responded:

I almost want to say, ‘and what tradition?’ You know, I mean that’s a hard one to answer. Like, we’ve never practised the black church tradition of collecting offering publicly in a line in front of the whole church, but most white people have never done that either. You know, so it wouldn’t have been an avoidance. You know, that question’s hard for that reason, and one of the things I would say is that we... and then I think you have to distinguish between historical practice and a traditional practice. Like for example, the early church didn’t do vacation bible school, but most churches in this community do vacation bible school. So our avoidance of that is not a reaction to an historical church practice, it’s just more of a missional thing. So that’s where that’s a really hard question. What I hope our answer would be is we don’t have any knee jerk reaction against anything the church has done historically and that we exclude it.⁶⁷¹

Still, even though Mike’s response points to the difficulty in attempting to list those practices from other traditions that were not appropriated, questioning the participants about the things that were avoided in their communities did in fact generate some responses worthy of note. Indeed, the responses that the participants gave to this question provided fertile insight into the participants’ understanding of ‘traditional ways of being church’, with most interviewees drawing from their own church experience in answering this question—citing activities such as Sunday school, women’s ministry bible studies and ‘preaching a lot of dogma and doctrine.’⁶⁷²

⁶⁷¹ Mike, turn 90.

⁶⁷² Gordon, turn 102.

In addition to appropriating a mix of practices from various traditions, when articulating the nature of their community, *Common Table* participants also appropriated a mix of ecclesiological identities from diverse traditions. In conversations that took place at the beginning of my participation with this emerging church, I heard the term ‘free church-sacramental’ being used by some of the community members to describe their unique ecclesiastical distinctives.⁶⁷³ In an interview, Joe described the way in which this idiom functioned as a descriptor for his community by saying, ‘I think that we do draw a lot off of our free church roots—which just means free church congregation, local congregations, local autonomy of the congregation’.⁶⁷⁴ After likening their understanding of church to the way Baptist church is ‘played out’ in America and Britain, Joe continued:

But you know, we also think of ourselves as a sacramental community. So I would say that we are somewhere between a free church and a sacramental community with a high emphasis on liturgy, sacraments of communion, Eucharist and—we’ll call it—the preaching of the word.⁶⁷⁵

Indeed, unmistakable ‘free church’ components plainly presented themselves in the political structures and non-denominational heritage of the *Common Table* community and therefore one could quickly recognize this particular stream in the mixture of ecclesiological identities. As for distinguishing the sacramental stream in *Common Table*, as I have already demonstrated in this chapter, Eucharistic celebration was a central feature in this emerging church. Nevertheless the unique way in which the community enacted this ceremony created a measure of difficulty in discerning the overall meaning that the participants ascribed to it. In clarifying the nature of this ritual, Joe said of the communion practice at *Common Table*:

It's not just something that we do out of a kind of remembrance—in the way that remembrance would be thinking fondly or sentimentally about, “oh, sometime in the past, Jesus died, and that was such a great event that we... I don't know why we eat, but we really think hard about it”—but it's to say that it's more of a remembrance that is looking forward and also a repetition of a practice that is central to the church. I think what we're saying is that there are some specific practices in the life of the church, where the grace of God in Christ is particularly present... to some extent in the Eucharist we're saying that

⁶⁷³ Author's field notes, Springfield, 7 May 2009.

⁶⁷⁴ Joe, turn 48.

⁶⁷⁵ Joe, turn 48.

the body of Christ is really present for those who are partaking at the table—that it is the grace of God given as we take the body of Christ into us and ingest it.⁶⁷⁶

Clearly for Joe, who often invited the communicants to the table during the liturgy with words similar to these, the significance of this ritual has moved noticeably beyond the ways in which he would have understood it in his free church background. Indeed, this articulation captures well the sacramental aspects of this practice in this community.

As for the practice of baptism in this community, both free church and sacramental influences can be identified. Because *Common Table* emerged out of a non-denominational free church tradition, the participants in this community held certain assumptions about baptism that were more in line with the Baptist and Anabaptist traditions. This means that the ‘default’ understanding and practice of baptism within *Common Table* could be broadly characterized as credobaptist. I deliberately use the term ‘default’ to indicate both the inherited nature of this ritual in this community, and the possibility for future adaptations to this practice within this emerging church. In fact, Joe stressed in an interview that ‘there is just a way that [baptism] has been practised’ at *Common Table*, and ‘there’s not a particular way that we, for all eternity, will be doing it’.⁶⁷⁷ Still, when reflecting on the current baptismal practice of this community, Mike, one of the leaders of *Common Table*, suggested a more free church understanding, stating, ‘as it’s evolved, we’ve pretty comfortably accepted kind of a Baptist practice’.⁶⁷⁸ Even so, Mike distinguish his community’s understanding of baptism from free church understandings, noting, ‘now the fact that we don’t—and this is controversial—but the fact that we don’t attach baptism to entrance into the community—in our visible community—takes some of the drama out of [the way we practice baptism]’.⁶⁷⁹ Yet, a degree of drama did remain in the way baptisms were practiced in the *Common Table* community, as Joe, describes in vivid language:

⁶⁷⁶ Joe, turn 50.

⁶⁷⁷ Joe, turn 54.

⁶⁷⁸ Mike, turn 86.

⁶⁷⁹ Mike, turn 86.

The way that we've done it in the past is try to use as much water as possible because... so people could see the chaotic nature of what is taking place in baptism—the true kind of entering into the chaotic waters that were covering the surface of the earth before the creation of the world. So entering into the chaos of nothingness and death, so that one can be raised to new life and world—the real, true, recreated world of life in Christ.⁶⁸⁰

Similar to Joe's articulation of the Eucharist, this richly worded account of baptism draws upon imagery from sacramental traditions in ascribing meaning to this ritual—further demonstrating the appropriation of diverse ecclesial identities at work in this emerging church.

Missional Focus – Springfield

A final theme to surface during my participation with *Common Table* was the attention that this community gave to the city of Springfield. In a manner similar to *Novitas*, the city of Springfield received considerable emphasis from *Common Table* participants as they narrated the formation of their community. In a manner also similar to *Novitas*, Springfield received prominent placement on the community's website. Much of the emphasis on the Springfield community at *Common Table* was nurtured under the rubric 'missional' (i.e. 'missional engagement', 'missional activity', etc.), and community members frequently made statements similar to Mike, who remarked in an interview, 'we believe that primarily our mission is to discern [God's work of redemption] in a local context and then appropriately participate in it'.⁶⁸¹

The clearest example of this church's commitment to the city of Springfield can be seen in their involvement with *Our City Care*. By aligning *Common Table* with other congregations and organizations from the Springfield community—in order to act together for the common good of the Springfield community—the participants in this emerging church faithfully lived out their commitment to the city. Still, for those at *Common Table*, a commitment to Springfield included more than simply being engaged in community activism, and in the early days of this emerging church, questions concerning the authenticity of their relationship to the city of Springfield

⁶⁸⁰ Joe, turn 54.

⁶⁸¹ Mike, turn 40.

surfaced. Mike recalled some early strains involved in focussing *Common Table's* attention upon the local city: 'When we got involved in Springfield... we realized that we had a question of authenticity because not a lot of people lived in Springfield'.⁶⁸² As he continued his narrative, Mike signified how his community sought to redress some of the dissonances caused by *Common Table* participants living in the peripheral suburbs:

Over four years we've centralized much more downtown. People live here, people have moved here, we've had graduate students at [The University] decide that they would live here and drive to school rather than live near school. Those were all significant choices. People sold homes in the suburbs and moved to the city. So part of it is creating an authentic proximity to our parish.⁶⁸³

As a result of this relocation effort, the participants' articulated fondness for the city of Springfield was more faithfully embodied, giving an actualisation to their stated missional desires.

Focus Group Summary and Validation

During the final week of fieldwork in Springfield, I assembled six *Common Table* participants for the purpose of conducting a focus group to review my initial findings. Similar to the aims of the *Novitas* focus group, this research event served as an opportunity to feed back to the community what I witnessed as an observer and what I heard as an interviewer. I conducted this focus group without taking an interim period of time away from the community in order to evaluate the data comprehensively. While this posed several challenges, and perhaps resulted in a schedule that lacked the critical depth present in the *Novitas* evaluation, the final product still captured well the overall themes and features of *Common Table*, and the participant's responses indeed served to validate and nuance my findings. Just as with my presentation of the *Novitas* research findings in the previous chapter, I have arranged the material below to reflect the original focus group schedule.⁶⁸⁴ In presenting the content of this schedule, I first highlight the most striking features of the *Common Table* community, followed by a section that recounts the various themes that arose from my observations and interviews. I then conclude this section

⁶⁸² Mike, turn 126.

⁶⁸³ Mike, turn 126.

⁶⁸⁴ This focus group schedule appears unedited and in its entirety in Appendix L.

with an initial attempt at locating this emerging church ecclesologically. Since the *Common Table* focus group followed a format similar to the *Novitas* focus group, I do not describe the details of how it was conducted at this point in the thesis.⁶⁸⁵

The Most Striking Features of the *Common Table* Community

(1) The Eucharist Celebration: The way in which communion was practiced at *Common Table* was unlike anything I had been a part of before. Not only was it striking in the way in which it was enacted, but when speaking with folks in interviews, the table often was referred to as the central practice of this community. There was an incredibly strong social dimension to this act, as well as impulses of egalitarianism and inclusivity. As I was reading through my field notes in preparation for the focus group, I discovered that there was a huge learning curve for me. It was difficult for me at first. Not for theological reasons per se, but there was just a general uncertainty as to what I was suppose to be doing during this ritual. Still, I consider the table—and the unique way it is performed—to be central to this community.

(2) The Proportion of Academically Affiliated Participants: The other feature that I found incredibly striking at *Common Table* was the proportion of the community participants who either had advanced degrees or were currently affiliated with the academy. While I recognized that Springfield and the surrounding area was an academic hotbed, this feature was still unlike any previous experience I have had with a church.

Themes that Emerged from my Participation in *Common Table*

(1) Sunday Night Gathering: The gathering of the community on Sunday nights was an important aspect in the life of *Common Table*. First and foremost, it was the space in which the community participated in the Eucharist celebration. The liturgy and church calendar were also important features during this time and music played a central role in navigating through worship, confession, absolution and benediction. In interviews, participants (especially those who had been a part of the community for a longer period of time) expressed affection for these more liturgical components

⁶⁸⁵ For a description of how the focus group was carried out, see chapter four, page 258.

of the gathering. The space was set up ‘in the round’ with the intention of fostering a communal atmosphere. Words such as dialogue and conversation were used as substitutes for words like preaching and sermon and attendees were encouraged to vocally participate in this portion of the liturgy. While the gathering was important, ‘church’ was not confined to this space and would also be lived out in pubs, neighbourhoods, work, etc.

(2) Missional Participation in Springfield: Another theme that emerged from the research can be summed up in these often-repeated community phrases—‘we strive to discern and enter into the redemptive work of God’ and ‘we look for what God is doing redemptively and then seek to participate’. This frequently took on a local flavour with an emphasis upon addressing issues in the Springfield community. Particular involvement with *Our City Care*, a local political activist group was one example of this. Some members of the community participated in this organization, while others were involved more in their own spheres of activity. Emphasis was placed upon caring for and serving this local community, with particular attention to the economic and racial injustices present. This activity was organic, and missional participation meant that there was an aversion in the *Common Table* community to formal church programs to address issues or needs.

(3) A Space for Theological and Intellectual Enquiry and Discussion: One of the other themes that emerged was a stated appreciation for a space in which questions were permissible and theological discussion and academic engagement could be pursued in the community. This aspect was particularly attractive to folks who were newer to the community. There was no ‘official’ doctrinal stance of the community, but clearly there was a Christological focus, with many of the participants finding meaning in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In fact, the minister’s liturgy, which was a ceremony whereby *Common Table* participants could more intentionally align themselves to this community, made certain claims about being gathered in Christ’s name.

(4) A Stated Desire for More Diversity within the Community: A repeated desire of community members that I encountered in both my interaction with participants and

in interviews was for increased diversity within the community. Diversity in age and race were particularly mentioned.

Ecclesiological Locating the *Common Table* Community.

(1) Participants distinguished their community using the American Evangelical church as a backdrop: A significant portion of the participants in the *Common Table* community that I met and interviewed had come out of some form of Evangelicalism. In these interviews and interactions, often when participants wanted to distinguish *Common Table* from other churches, they would do so with evangelical churches as their antithesis.

(2) Verbal Orientation vs. Visual Orientation: If one were to imagine a rough spectrum being drawn, and on one end of this spectrum there existed churches and traditions that were verbally oriented and on the other end there existed churches and traditions that were visually oriented; the churches on the visually oriented side of the spectrum would tend to be of a ‘catholic’ or ‘orthodox’ persuasion and the churches on the verbally oriented side would tend to be of a ‘free church’ or ‘evangelical’ persuasion. *Common Table* struck me as being a very verbally oriented community. Many of the worship engagements were word—either spoken, read or sung. Indeed, there were visual elements present, and the central practice of the Eucharist celebration possessed visual properties, but overall much of the *Common Table* gathering remained verbally oriented.

(3) A penchant for ecclesial eclecticism: When contemplating the unique contributions of *Common Table*, I noticed a strong penchant for ecclesial eclecticism within the community. In other words, there existed an intentional borrowing of ‘the good’—that is ‘the perceived good’—from a wide variety of church traditions. Thus, what I found to be unique about this community was the way in which *Common Table* eclectically blended various traditions, beliefs and practices in order to shape something that was in fact distinct from other ecclesial traditions.

Chapter 6: Emerging Churches in Conversation with Parent Communities

In this chapter, I bring the communities of *Novitas* and *Common Table* into dialogue with their parent communities—giving particular attention to the ways in which these emerging churches can impact their parent communities’ understanding of what it is to be church. Yet, before turning to this analysis, a review of what has taken place in the thesis thus far will prove helpful.

After offering an introduction to the thesis in chapter one—where I provided a preliminary sketch of the wider emerging church phenomenon, a brief account of my own earlier experiences with emerging communities, and an initial overview of the research already conducted on emerging church—I turned my attention towards an examination of the methodological approach taken for this thesis in chapter two. In this second chapter I sharpened the focus of the research question undergirding the thesis. Through this process of sharpening, the following question surfaced: What contributions might emerging churches make to their parent communities’ understanding of what it is to be church? In focusing this research question, I also determined that understanding why those in emerging churches left their parent traditions, and uncovering what it is they find meaningful in their own emerging communities, would go a long way in helping me discover the contributions these emerging communities could make to their parent traditions. I then identified the field of practical theology as the appropriate discipline in which to explore these questions, and argued for an approach to practical theology that moves beyond the prevalent models of correlation and recognizes the embodied nature of theology. Identified in this thesis as ‘theology in the vernacular’ or ‘local theologies’, this particular approach posits that theology is deeply embedded within the everyday language, symbols, and practices of ordinary individuals and communities. Thus, the research in this thesis centred on two concrete emerging communities and employed qualitative methods to examine and analyse the actual practices, values, and beliefs of community participants—treating the data generated through the investigation of *Novitas* and *Common Table* as theological material.

Still, in order to answer the research question, I needed to develop a mechanism for bringing the data generated through this study into conversation with the parent traditions of these emerging communities. Adapting a method used by Robert Schreiter in his work on local theologies, I developed a structure that would identify the various components in this dialogue process and would indicate the general flow of the conversation being facilitated. Since this mechanism also served as the basic outline for the presentation of the research in this thesis, I have reproduced it here.

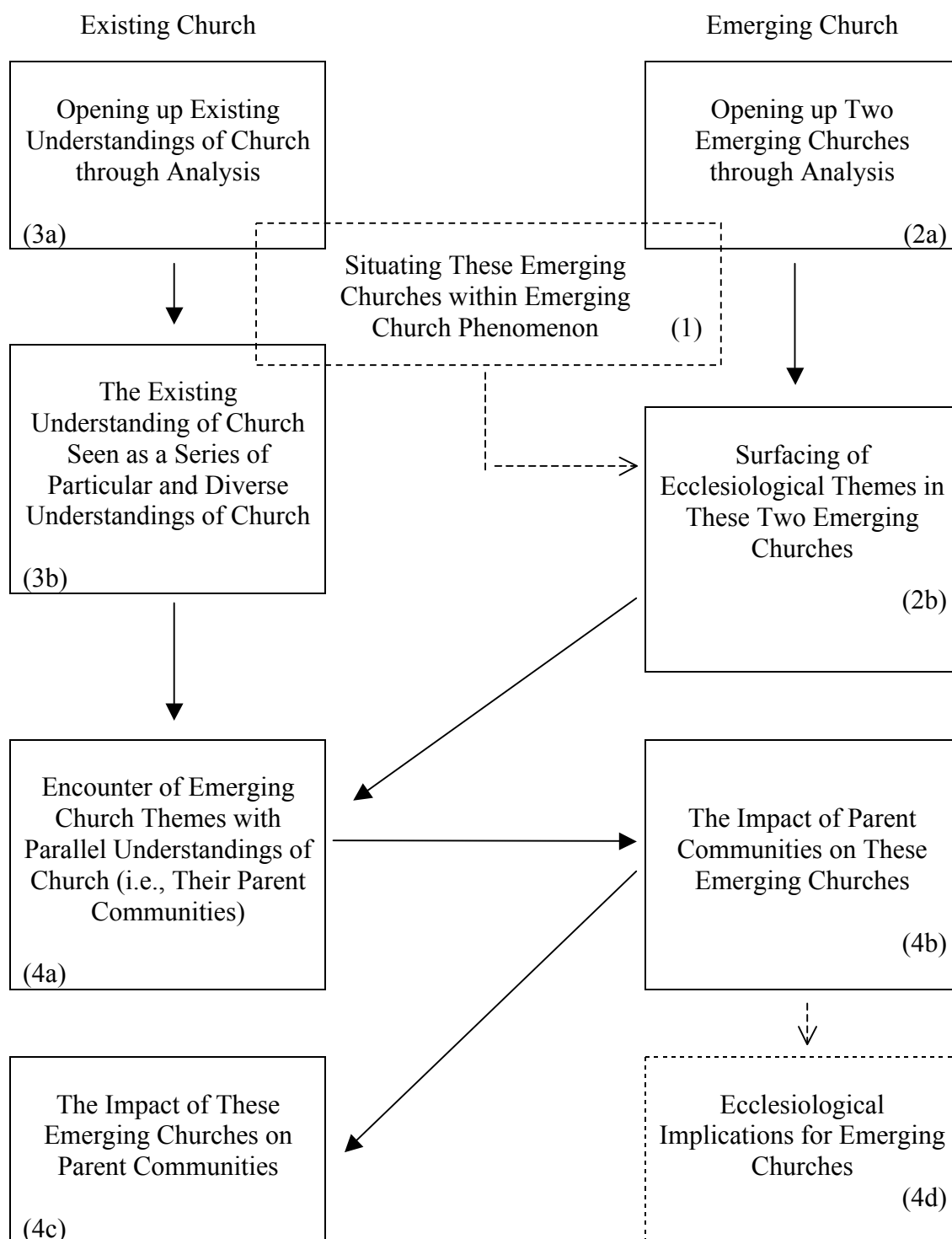


Chart 2: Components in the Dialogue Process
[Chart first appeared on page 47]

As this above chart indicates, the dialogue process begins by situating these two emerging communities within the framework of the wider emerging church phenomenon (*area 1*). Thus, in chapter three of the thesis, I provided an ecclesial context for this study by outlining the history and development of emerging church, and locating these emerging communities within that narrative. Significantly, this exercise revealed how *Novitas* developed alongside the alternative worship groups emerging from the evangelical and charismatic wings of the churches in the U.K., and how *Common Table* developed alongside the *Emergent Village* community emerging out of large evangelical mega-churches in the U.S. Following this third chapter, I then turned my attention towards a thorough depiction of the *Novitas* and *Common Table* communities in chapters four and five—opening up these emerging churches through an in-depth analysis of their communal lives (*area 2a*). Through this examination, a number of ecclesiological themes surfaced for each community (*area 2b*). While the profiles of these two emerging churches remained distinct in a number of notable ways—such as the dynamics of *Novitas*’ relationship to the *Fulcrum Café* and its affiliation with the Anglican and Methodist church, as well as the situation of *Common Table* being constituted by a high degree of academically affiliated participants and its exceptional Eucharistic practices—there does exist enough commonality between the two communities to draw insights from their shared patterns. In an attempt to better compare these communities and to adequately locate the contributions they can make to their parent communities understanding of church, I bring together the findings from these separate sites of research to explore the key ecclesiological features located in their practices. Examining these common patterns reveals five key ecclesiological features present in these emerging churches: (1) the prevalence of an ecclesial eclecticism, (2) the carving out of a space for theological discussion and intellectual enquiry, (3) a resolute fondness for the local cities of Wellingham and Springfield, (4) the vital nature of the weekly gathering, and (5) a robustly verbal orientation in the worship gatherings. These five ecclesiological features will be further considered in the below encounter between these emerging churches and their parent tradition.

Having already completed the presentation of the research associated with *area 1* and *area 2* of the dialogue process in chapters three, four, and five, I now turn my attention towards *area 3* and *area 4* of the mechanism adapted from Schreiter. In the

following sections I first engage in a concise investigation of ecclesiology, showing how the existing understanding of church should be seen as a series of particular and diverse understandings of church (*area 3a and 3b*). In this analysis, I focus particular attention on how this understanding of church relates to the approach to practical theology taken in this thesis, and how the distinct ways that existing church can be understood in the United States and the United Kingdom impact one's understanding of emerging church. Drawing these latter distinctions is important, as these two countries provide the setting for this study of emerging church. Following this discussion of existing understandings of church, I then bring these two emerging churches into dialogue with their parent communities (*area 4*)—focusing particularly on the impact that these emerging churches have on their parent communities' understanding of what it is to be church.

Existing Understandings of Church

Entering into an analysis of existing understandings of church invites the researcher into a wider conversation concerning the nature of ecclesiology. In the section below, I offer a cursory account of ecclesiology's origins, as well as the recent developments that have taken place in this field. In presenting this abbreviated account, I am not attempting to consider the entire enterprise of ecclesiology—as to do so moves well beyond the scope of this thesis. What is important for the purposes of my present argument is to show how the approach taken to ecclesiology in this thesis fits within the mechanism adapted from Schreiter, and corresponds with my overall approach to practical theology. It is to this more limited consideration of ecclesiology's origin and development that I now turn.

Ecclesiology: Opening up an Understanding of Church

The term ecclesiology was first employed in the nineteenth century to refer strictly to the study of the architecture and decoration of actual church buildings.⁶⁸⁶ Today the use of the term in this manner has fallen out of vogue, with the dominant understanding of ecclesiology now focusing upon the enquiry into the nature of the church as a theological reality. Even so, the discipline that the term ecclesiology currently describes—namely, the theological study of the Christian church—did not

⁶⁸⁶ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. revised, s.v. "Ecclesiology."

surface as a *distinct* theme in systematic enquiry until it was introduced in the midst of fifteenth century reforms.⁶⁸⁷ Furthermore, these early attempts at a systematized ecclesiology emerged incrementally, with the Reformers' evolving treatment of the church becoming more and more considerable as time moved forward. Wolfhart Pannenberg sees a principal example of this evolution in John Calvin's thought, where the first edition of his *Institutes* did not contain a single chapter dedicated exclusively to the doctrine of the church. It is only in his revised editions that he intensifies his accounts of the concept of the church.⁶⁸⁸ Yet, despite ecclesiology's late arrival and its slow development, it has quickly made up ground to become what Jaroslav Pelikan called the 'bearer of the whole of the Christian message for the twentieth century'.⁶⁸⁹ Pelikan argues that the ecumenical surge in the previous century placed the onus upon ecclesiology to become the central theme around which entire doctrinal traditions of diverse fellowships sought to unite.

Given its relatively novel place amongst the systematics and its meteoric rise in ecumenical prominence, ecclesiology clearly has not been a static enterprise, and the craft of thinking theologically about the church has undergone notable shifts in the past few decades. To demonstrate these shifts, I return to Michael Jenkins' account of previous approaches to ecclesiology. As highlighted in chapter two of this thesis, Jenkins suggests that the ecclesiological endeavours of past generations followed a fairly predictable pattern. First, the ecclesiologist would focus attention on either the biblical foundations of church, descriptions of the early Christian community or creedal formulae regarding church. This material would usually be handled in a harmonizing fashion, ignoring many of the more uneven realities of diversity, plurality and particularity found in concrete experiences of local faith communities. From this homogeneous understanding of church, the ecclesiologist would then

⁶⁸⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 21-22. Pannenberg does note the works of patristic and Latin writers that contain isolated statements and concepts about the church, but he argues that they offered no systematically developed account of the notion of church as an independent theme.

⁶⁸⁸ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, p. 22.

⁶⁸⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (Since 1700)*, The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, vol. 5 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 282.

formulate foundational principles that are to be regarded as prescriptive for contemporary Christian community through a basic, Origin=Norm formula.⁶⁹⁰

In the contemporary context however, the more varied aspects of plurality, diversity, and particularity that were left behind a generation ago now earnestly occupy the interests of many ecclesiological researchers. As indicated in chapter two, Nicholas Healy has selected the term ‘new ecclesiology’ to classify the growing effort of ecclesiologists who are turning their attention to the activities and functions of the concrete church.⁶⁹¹ The recent rise in congregational studies in the US and the UK, as well as the emergence of new cross-disciplinary research around ecclesiology and ethnography, also give clear evidence of this developing shift.⁶⁹² In fact, studies such as these bring ecclesiologists face to face with the plurality and diversity of church life in such a way that it can often exhaust the researcher who labours through the arduous and messy processes of translating ‘observed life’ into meaningful texts.⁶⁹³

In opening up existing understandings of church in this thesis, I too eschew a totalizing and universalizing ecclesiology and instead focus upon the messier actualities of plurality, particularity, and diversity. The reason for this approach rests in the fact that this thesis represents a work of practical theology. Thus, being a work of practical theology, my research is deeply concerned with those aspects that most concern the practical theologian. Kathleen A. Cahalan and James R. Nieman

⁶⁹⁰ Michael Jenkins, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 3. By using this material from Jenkins, I am not suggesting that the New Testament scriptures and the early church do not have a normative function for churches today. Indeed they do. See Roger Haight, S.J., *Christian Community in History*, vol. 1: Historical Ecclesiology (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 137, n. 144. Even so, the normative function that the New Testament and early church possesses for today is more complex and nuanced than what Jenkins is describing in the simple formula: Origin = Norm.

⁶⁹¹ Nicholas M. Healy, “Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5, no. 3 (November 2003): pp. 287-308.

⁶⁹² See Linda Woodhead, Matthew Guest, and Karin Tusting, “Congregational Studies: Taking Stock,” in *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context*, (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 1-23; and Pete Ward, ed., *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

⁶⁹³ Frances Ward, “The Messiness of Studying Congregations Using Ethnographic Methods,” in *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context*, ed. Mathew Guest, Karin Tusting, and Woodhead Linda (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2004), p. 125.

state well those characteristics that lie at the heart of the practical theologian's undertaking:

At every level of its work, practical theology claims the particularity of contexts as central to its interests. It does not seek universality or uniformity, but wants instead to understand the extant realities and actual demands in which faithful discipleship is lived out.⁶⁹⁴

Crucially, these core principles that serve to shape this discipline also inform my approach to ecclesiology in this thesis. Therefore, since a more concentrated focus on particularity and diversity informs the approach to ecclesiology taken in this thesis, a monolithic understanding of church does not emerge. Instead, existing understandings of church are seen as a series of particular and diverse understandings of church. I now turn my attention towards formulating an ecclesiological approach in line with this understanding of church and in line with practical theology.

'Church' as Series of Particular and Diverse Understandings of Church

In this section, I first show how the above-mentioned totalizing and universalizing approaches to ecclesiology run contrary to the approach to practical theology taken in this thesis. I then argue for an ecclesiological approach that is conscious of the historical, social, and cultural dimensions of church. In carrying out this exercise of moving towards an understanding of church as a series of particular and diverse understandings of church, I draw primarily on the ecclesologically momentous works of Roger Haight and Nicholas Healy.⁶⁹⁵

Haight identifies the more universalizing or totalizing approaches to understanding church as an ecclesiology from above. Haight marks out six related features of this ecclesiological method, which when considered together, characterize its strategy. These six features are (1) an a-historical understanding of church, (2) a consideration

⁶⁹⁴ Kathleen A. Cahalan and James R. Nieman, "Mapping the Field of Practical Theology," in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), p. 80.

⁶⁹⁵ Haight uses the terminology of an *ecclesiology from below* and Healy uses the terminology of a *practical-prophetic ecclesiology* to describe their respective approaches. While the concepts drawn together to inform my ecclesiological approach represents an amalgamation of these two authors, what follows is not a wholesale rearticulating of their arguments. See: Haight, S.J., *Christian Community*, vol. 1; and Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

of the whole church solely in terms of one's own tradition, (3) an attempt to make unquestioned appeals to authoritative texts and/or traditions, (4) a consideration of church doctrinally as opposed to historically, (5) a tendency for a Christocentric understanding of church to become an ecclesiocentric understanding of church and (6) a view that the current structures of ministry correspond to the will of God.⁶⁹⁶ For the purposes of this thesis, I do not attempt to engage these features as distinct variables, but rather investigate them in their totality, emphasizing their contributions in shaping a tempting, yet inadequate method for developing an understanding of church.

In its most foundational form, an ecclesiology from above seeks to identify an essence, nature or substance of the church that would transcend any given context—be that historical, cultural, societal or political.⁶⁹⁷ In so doing, this ecclesiological approach seeks the abstraction of a certain set of establishing elements from their particular historical ecclesial occurrences in order to universally characterize the church. The results of this abstraction means that these historical or cultural particulars no longer remain as a defining feature of the church and therefore ecclesiology devolves into an a-contextual endeavour. This sort of de-contextualization and abstraction opens ecclesiology up to either a Docetic or Platonic vision of the church. In the case of the former, this means that no value is assigned to the human constituency or social shape of the church and the notion of the church as a vibrant and living human community 'realizing itself in the here and now' is lost.⁶⁹⁸ As for the latter, any Platonic vision of the church that seeks to locate an essence of the church outside of the church's particular historical-cultural context remains incompatible with the concrete reality of what church actually is. Hans Küng demonstrates well the shortcoming of this approach.

The 'essential nature' of the Church is not to be found in some unchanging Platonic heaven of ideas, but only in the *history* of the Church. The real Church not only has a history, it exists by having a history. There is no 'doctrine' of the Church in the sense of an unalterable metaphysical and ontological system, but only one which

⁶⁹⁶ Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 1, pp. 18-25.

⁶⁹⁷ Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 1, p. 19.

⁶⁹⁸ Johannes A. van der Ven, *Ecclesiology in Context* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 92.

is historically conditioned, within the framework of the history of the Church, its dogmas and its theology.⁶⁹⁹

If, however, through an ecclesiology from above, the doctrine of the church is conceived of as an ‘unalterable metaphysical and ontological system’, then an implicit dichotomy is forged between what the church *is* and what the church *ought to be*.⁷⁰⁰ Typical to this approach, the *ought* oftentimes supersedes the *is*, and a form of what Healy calls *blueprint ecclesiology* emerges—where the focus of one’s enquiry into ecclesiology is essentially theoretical and remains fixated ‘more upon discerning the right things to think about the church rather than orientated to the living, rather messy, confused and confusing body that the church actually is’.⁷⁰¹

Importantly, the dichotomy that develops from an ecclesiology from above can be comparable to the dichotomy that develops through correlational models of practical theology. Just as an ecclesiology from above results in ‘blueprint’ approaches designed to reconcile the ‘is’ and ‘ought’ of church life, correlational models of practical theology are designed to ‘reconcile’ theology and human experience. Both of these approaches neglect the deep connectedness between the actual practices of Christian communities and the theology embedded within, and carried along by, those very practices. As put forward in chapter two, the abstracting of theology from practice, which is inherent in correlational models, tends to reinforce the dualisms that the discipline of practical theology vigilantly seeks to overcome—and thus has been rejected in this thesis. Likewise, the tendency towards abstraction that results from an ecclesiology from above will also be rejected. According to Haight, an ecclesiology from above attempts to interpret distinct historical events—such as the origins and critical developments of the church—in doctrinal terms, abstracting these ‘events’ from what Haight identifies as critical history.⁷⁰² Thus, an ecclesiology from above imagines the founding and progression of the church to be a *direct* act of God and relegates non-divine contingencies in the origin and development of the church to the periphery. This results in an ecclesiology that makes unmediated

⁶⁹⁹ Hans Küng, *The Church*, trans. Ray Ockenden and Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Search Press, 1971), p. 13.

⁷⁰⁰ Jenkins, *Church Faces Death*, p. 86.

⁷⁰¹ Healy, *Church, World and Christian Life*, p. 3.

⁷⁰² Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 1, p. 21.

appeals to the New Testament and other doctrinal affirmations in understanding the church. Furthermore, this also leads to a conviction that the structures and ministries of the church have been divinely or supernaturally revealed as well.⁷⁰³ Also consistent with an ecclesiology from above is the tendency for each church to understand itself in terms of its own tradition and thus to interpret the entire church in light of itself. For instance, this ecclesiological approach considers the ecclesiologist's own church as displaying the correct form of church, and thus stands as the norm for the entire church.⁷⁰⁴ Miroslav Volf rightly sees this practice of privileging one's own form of church as the once revealed and now timeless norm for the whole of church to be both contrary to diverse forms of church found in scripture and to be stifling to the vitality of a Christian faith which is capable of flexible adaptation to rapidly changing societies.⁷⁰⁵

In contrast to an ecclesiology from above—and in harmony with the approach to practical theology taken in this thesis—I argue for an ecclesiological approach that envisions the essence of church as something wholly inextricable from the church's historical, social and cultural contexts. Because of this, I acknowledge along with Jinkins that the church 'exists in irreducible plurality and particularity' and therefore 'possesses a complexity that defies easy answers and clear definitions'.⁷⁰⁶ This more concrete approach to ecclesiology accords well with practical theology because it recognizes that the church is not simply ostensibly related to its sociological, historical and cultural conditions, but it is indeed deeply dependent upon them as the church itself is 'rooted in the soil of human societies and cultures'.⁷⁰⁷

⁷⁰³ In this paradigm, Haight notices how these divinely ordained structures will 'allow for adjustments within itself to meet the exigencies of ministry', but 'the basic structure itself will not be changed, for in an ecclesiology from above it has been established by or according to the will of God'. Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 1, p. 25.

⁷⁰⁴ In this approach the rationale is that the ecclesiologist's church 'is the one true church, so that in describing itself, it describes the way the whole church should be.' Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 1, p. 20.

⁷⁰⁵ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 21.

⁷⁰⁶ Jinkins, *Church Faces Death*, p. 5.

⁷⁰⁷ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical & Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 232.

The shaping force that this approach to ecclesiology has upon my understanding of church in this thesis is significant. First, this approach recognizes that our understanding of church stands as a compilation of particular and diverse understandings of church that have arisen in relation to specific historical and cultural contexts. Thus, there has never existed a single understanding of church that is able to encapsulate the whole of the church.⁷⁰⁸ In fact, as Schreiter argues, the concept of diverse understandings of church is even evidenced in the New Testament. He suggests that scripture reveals ‘a variety of different kinds of communities’, and that ‘there is no unified New Testament church, except in the minds of later Christians’.⁷⁰⁹ Nevertheless, these divergent understandings of church—both the past and the present—are not wholly independent of one another. Just as every Christian church is bound to a particular culture and to a particular historical situation, and yet simultaneously remains a part of the greater whole of the Christian movement, so too do these historically and culturally bound understanding of church remain a part of the greater whole of our wider understanding of church.⁷¹⁰ Thus, for these particular historically and culturally situated understandings of church to be authenticated and therefore ‘survive’ in such a way as to combine with other understandings of church to shape the wider realm of *ecclesiology*, they must express ‘with some degree of adequacy’ the experience of Christians throughout the centuries.⁷¹¹

Second, although I have been arguing for an approach to ecclesiology that remains deliberately conscious of the historical, cultural, and social dimensions that impact our understandings of church, this should not be seen as a negation of the spiritual or ‘theological’ aspects that comprise our understandings of church. To do this ignores a very important constitutive facet of Christian communities—namely, their particular connection to God.⁷¹² Just as churches have a requisite grounding in both

⁷⁰⁸ Indeed as Haight points out, even if an ecclesiology were to encompass the whole of the church, it would instantly be out-dated as the church is continually changing. Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 1, p. 44.

⁷⁰⁹ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (1985; repr., Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 10.

⁷¹⁰ Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 1, pp. 58-59.

⁷¹¹ Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, p. 32.

⁷¹² See: Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 1, p. 36.

history and society, they also possesses what Haight calls a ‘deep grounding in the will, initiative, and active presence of God’.⁷¹³ In fact, taking into account the divine is the distinctive feature that divides theological endeavours from their non-theological counterparts. Although both endeavours may deal with the same subject material, they will inevitably approach this with decidedly different perspectives on matters relating to God and God’s activities. The approach to ecclesiology taken in this thesis recognizes that churches are both human and social realities as well as divinely related communities. Without this recognition, understandings of church can devolve into a form of ecclesiological Ebionism, where any union with the divine is denied. Even so, as I have maintained throughout this chapter, the theological nature of Christian communities is not something that one can consider in distinction from the social, cultural, and historical realities of Christian communities. Thus, I now turn to a consideration of the diverse understandings of church that have risen in response to the particular historical and cultural conditions of religious life the United Kingdom and the United States.

Understandings of ‘Church’ in the U.K. and the U.S.

Before bringing these two emerging churches into an encounter with their parent communities, one of the more important factors that must be considered is the distinct context in which each of these emerging churches exists. If, as argued above, the essence of church is wholly inextricable from the church’s historical, social, and cultural contexts, then, in order to better facilitate an encounter between existing church and emerging church, it is essential to recognize the distinct understandings of church that have historically and culturally developed in the U.S. and the U.K. While producing an in depth analysis of church life in the United States and the United Kingdom falls well beyond the scope of this thesis, highlighting the crucial differences between the two contexts will provide a helpful backdrop when bringing *Common Table* and *Novitas* into an encounter with their parent traditions. With that aim in mind, I now succinctly engage with the analysis of sociologists Peter Berger, Grace Davie and Effie Fokas.

⁷¹³ Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 1, p. 39.

In their work on religion in the United States and Europe, a predominant aspect under consideration by Berger, Davie and Fokas is the frequently voiced sentiment that the United States is a religious society, and Europe is a secular one. While noting that ‘it has become something of a cliché’ to claim this, the researchers acknowledge that ‘the cliché does indeed mirror reality’—even if reality remains more complicated than the straightforward statement suggests.⁷¹⁴ As they attempt to account for the widely held theme of a religious America and a secular Europe, Berger, Davie and Fokas identify a selection of variants that serve as distinguishing characteristics between the two situations. Arguing that the United States and Europe possess different intellectual traditions and contrasting historical relationships to religion—relationships that have been transmitted through dissimilar institutional and social mechanisms—these scholars suggest that older paradigms linking secularity with modernity should be reconsidered in light of these vastly different contexts. Positing instead the concept of ‘multiple modernities’, Berger, Davie and Fokas suggest that religion represents an ‘indigenous difference’ within a society and is capable of providing the impetus for the construction of an alternative modernity that remains particular to its given context.⁷¹⁵

Again, when analysing understandings of church in the United States and the United Kingdom, attempting to account for the whole of Berger, Davie and Fokas’ important study goes beyond the purview of this research. Still, there are particular points of interest that should be singled out here, as they offer valuable insight into the distinct nature of existing and emerging church in these differing contexts. For instance, as I noted in the first chapter, some of the difficulties encountered in attempting to locate the essential qualities of emerging church stem from the fact that those observing and describing this phenomenon do not begin with a shared understanding of ‘church’. As such, I am deeply sympathetic to a point made by Stanley Hauerwas, who, when recognizing that crucial discussions surrounding ‘church’ often struggle to find a meaningful end, wrote: ‘the difficulty, however, is that words like “church” and “congregation” are so vague that our agreement might well mask deeper disagreements if we explore further what we mean by those

⁷¹⁴ Peter Berger, Grace Davie and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?: A Theme and Variations* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), p. 9.

⁷¹⁵ Berger, Davie and Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe*, p. 142.

terms’.⁷¹⁶ Clear examples of this difficulty can be found in the discussions centring on emerging church in the United States and the United Kingdom—where it is tempting for one to assume that these two contexts begin with an identical understanding of existing church. This assumption seriously neglects the historical, cultural, and ecclesiastical particulars of these very different settings, and consequently fails to recognize that ‘emerging’ carries with it a distinct emphasis unique to each particular context. The research by Berger, Davie, and Fokas helps to mitigate this breakdown by addressing both the distinct relationship that the Church has to the State in the American context, and by examining the ‘religious marketplace’ that has developed as a related result.

Because of these related dynamics, the ecclesial context of the United States is one marked by pluralist competition and voluntary association, where ‘church’ primarily means ‘the local religious community’ made up of those who assemble together.⁷¹⁷ By contrast, notions of ‘church’ in the United Kingdom remain closely linked to the European territorial system, with its geographically defined parishes and its historic relationship to the State. Consequently, the emerging church conversation in the United Kingdom—and particularly within the Church of England—is laced with themes of the church ‘emerging’ from the traditional structures that have customarily defined it, in order to exist where the people are already gathering. Rowan Williams’s ‘mixed economy’ language introduced in chapter three—where parish church and emerging church exist side by side—stands as a clear example of this perspective. According to Williams, even though ‘the parochial system remains an essential and central part of the national Church’s strategy to deliver incarnational mission’, there is a need ‘to recognize that a variety of integrated missionary approaches is required’.⁷¹⁸ Thus, these ‘network churches’ that develop and exist alongside parish churches often acquire the appellation ‘emerging church’ in Church of England discourse as a way of distinguishing these mission-shaped communities from parish

⁷¹⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 1988), p. 111.

⁷¹⁷ Berger, Davie and Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe*, p. 30.

⁷¹⁸ Church of England’s Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), p. xi.

churches and the territorial responsibility parish churches possess. Yet, for emerging church conversations in the United States, the notion of a church emerging from the traditional structures of parish means very little since the concept of ‘church’ does not carry with it these same geographic associations. Indeed, as R. Stephen Warner has argued, religious life in America is marked by ‘de facto congregationalism’—which means that despite a church’s governance or structures, in practice, ‘the local church is effectively constituted by its members, not by geography’.⁷¹⁹ Accordingly then, in ecclesologically oriented discussions in the United States, ‘emerging church’ simply becomes one more brand of church in the competitive religious marketplace that includes seeker churches, mega-churches, multi-site churches, evangelical churches, denominationally aligned churches, etc. In this context, that which is ‘emerging’ must find meaning by distinguishing itself, not from the established parochial church, but from the multitude of other Christian churches that dot the religious landscape.

Clearly these variances have the potential to create very different understandings of emerging church, depending upon whether one is observing the phenomenon in the United States or in the United Kingdom. With these distinct understandings of ‘church’ in the U.K. and the U.S. in mind, I now turn towards an encounter between *Novitas* and *Common Table* and their parent traditions.

Encounter Between Emerging Church and Parent Tradition

Thus far in this chapter, I have argued that our understanding of church is best seen as a series of particular and diverse understandings of church that have arisen in relation to specific historical and cultural contexts. Since this thesis focuses on an encounter between emerging churches and their parent communities in the United Kingdom and the United States, I have given particular attention to the broad historical and cultural dynamics impacting the understanding of ‘church’ and ‘emerging church’ in these two contexts. Still, in order to give greater attention to the ways in which *Novitas* and *Common Table* impact their parent communities’ understanding of what it is to be church, I must consider more closely the traditions

⁷¹⁹ R. Stephen Warner, *A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 163.

from which these communities emerged. In particular, this means turning my attention towards evangelical communities in the U.K. and the U.S.—focusing specifically on the understanding of ‘church’ in this tradition.

As I indicated in chapter two, the encounter between these emerging communities and their parent tradition is deeply reliant on data generated through interactions and interviews with emerging church participants. This means that the portrayal of the parent communities of *Novitas* and *Common Table*—along with the portrayal of evangelical understandings of church—has been drawn primarily from the experiences of emerging church participants. The reason for privileging the experiences of these participants in this manner is twofold. The first reason is a practical one. Attempting to give a comprehensive account of something as diverse and fluid as an evangelical understanding of church goes well beyond the scope of thesis. Given that David Bebbington, a notable historian of the evangelical movement, has described evangelicalism as consisting of ‘all those strands in Protestantism that have not been either too high in churchmanship or too broad in theology to qualify for acceptance’, providing an all-inclusive description of evangelical ecclesiology would be onerous.⁷²⁰ What is more, from the perspective of another noted evangelical scholar, giving an account of an evangelical understanding of church might not even be possible. Indeed, Stanley Grenz has questioned whether evangelicals even possess a coherent ecclesiology, suggesting that, ‘evangelicalism has never developed or worked from a thoroughgoing ecclesiology.’⁷²¹ Even in the case of *Novitas*, which emerged from the evangelical wings of the Anglican and Methodist traditions in the U.K., similar challenges exist in depicting the understanding of church found in their parent communities. For instance, according to Methodist theologians, the Methodist tradition exhibits a dearth of theological reflection around the nature of the church. David Carter has lamented that many see his own tradition’s ecclesiology ‘as purely pragmatic, if not also downright ambiguous’.⁷²² Likewise, George Hunter has concluded that, ‘whatever the strengths

⁷²⁰ D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History From the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. vi.

⁷²¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2000), p. 288.

⁷²² David Carter, “The Methodist Churches,” in *The Christian Church: An Introduction to the Major Traditions*, ed. Paul Avis (London: SPCK, 2002), p. 49.

of its theology and tradition, Methodism has been consistently afflicted with an ambiguous doctrine of the Church.⁷²³ Yet, despite these above claims concerning the lack of an evangelical (and Methodist) understanding of church, one should not conclude that there is no such thing as an evangelical ecclesiology. To be clear, every church possesses a particular ecclesiology regardless of whether or not the articulation of that ecclesiology is made formal. In line with what has been argued throughout this thesis, simply by being church, a community implicitly lives out its own distinct understanding of church. Thus, in the case of this current research, I focus my attention on these embodied expressions of evangelical ecclesiology—giving particular attention to the experiences of those who have emerged from this tradition.

Focusing on the ‘lived ecclesiology’ of the evangelical tradition points to the second reason I have privileged the experiences of emerging church participants when determining their parent communities’ understanding of church. In fact, it is necessary that I privilege these experiences in order to be faithful to the methodological approach taken in this thesis. Because my approach to practical theology sees theology as being deeply embedded within the everyday language, symbols, and practices of ordinary individuals and communities, I took an interpretive constructionist epistemological position. As described in chapter two, this epistemological position suggests that meaning is accessed through the shared perspectives of individuals and communities. Thus, when it comes to developing a portrait of evangelical understandings of church—and developing a description of why participants emerged from this tradition—it is fitting for me to draw primarily upon the perspectives of those in emerging church to construct these portrayals. What is more, because this approach sees theology as something that does not exist independent of these embodied expressions, the experiences of the participants in both their parent communities and these emerging communities are treated as ecclesiological data. Still, due to the constructed nature of this data, I wish to confirm and support these portrayals of the participant’s parent communities by positioning them alongside other research on the evangelical tradition. Therefore, in

⁷²³ George G. Hunter, “The Apostolic Identity of the Church and Wesleyan Christianity,” in *Theology and Evangelism in the Wesleyan Heritage*, ed. James C. Logan (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 1994), p. 158.

the sections that follow, in order to corroborate the experiences that participants had in their parent communities, I make reference to the defining qualities of evangelicalism proposed by David Bebbington and confirmed by Mark Noll. Since these two scholars stand as preeminent interpreters of evangelicalism in the U.K. and the U.S., substantiating emerging church participants' experiences of evangelicalism with Bebbington and Noll's understanding of this tradition is fitting. Thus, before turning to an examination of how these emerging communities have been impacted by their parent communities, I first introduce Bebbington's evangelical quadrilateral—which will serve to verify emerging church participants' experiences in these communities.

Although Bebbington, in putting forward the defining qualities of evangelicalism, takes into consideration the American influences on British evangelicalism, his focus is on this tradition in the U.K. Still, the impact of his analysis of the evangelical tradition reaches sufficiently beyond the British context, and thus the quadrilateral he develops can be more widely applied. In fact, Mark Noll, who focuses on evangelicalism in the U.S., suggests that, 'at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there are very few generalizations that apply to all American evangelicals. To be sure, David Bebbington's four defining characteristics are still generally valid'.⁷²⁴ These four defining characteristics, which Bebbington argues have been 'a continuing set of characteristics' lasting from the eighteenth century through the twentieth, are: '*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible, and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross'.⁷²⁵ According to Bebbington, taken together, these continuing characteristics 'form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of evangelicalism', and reveal 'the existence of an evangelical tradition'.⁷²⁶ In making reference back to this quadrilateral in the following sections, I give particular attention to conversionism, as this characteristic is strongly present in the participants experiences in their parent communities, and, in Bebbington's analysis, forms the basis for other characteristics

⁷²⁴ Mark A. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), p. 24.

⁷²⁵ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp. 2-3 [italics mine].

⁷²⁶ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp. 2,3.

such as activism. As Bebbington argues, the evangelical tradition divided humanity into two categories, the converted and the unconverted, with conversion becoming the ‘one gateway to vital Christianity’.⁷²⁷ This emphasis on conversion in the parent tradition of these emerging churches, with the doctrinal and behavioural boundaries associated with it, will occupy a significant portion of my attention in the following sections.

The Impact of Parent Communities on *Novitas* and *Common Table*

Although this thesis is chiefly focused on the impact that emerging churches have on their parent communities, a preliminary encounter in the dialogue process must first be considered—namely, the impact that the parent communities have on emerging churches. As indicated in chapter two, drawing attention to this impact serves to affirm the relationship between emerging communities and wider understandings of church by recognizing that the practices and ecclesiological understandings of these emerging churches have been born from, as Schreiter describes it, a ‘genuine encounter with the Christian tradition’.⁷²⁸ Through this encounter, practices and ecclesiological understandings found in emerging communities can be seen as belonging to the wider Christian tradition.

This particular encounter (*area 4b*) is drawn out of the portrayals of *Novitas* and *Common Table* in chapters four and five of the thesis, and unfolds in two parts. First, I identify those things found within the parent communities that have shaped the ecclesial life, practice, and understanding of these emerging communities. Second, because these emerging communities are, in part, attempting to distinguish themselves from their parent traditions, I then identify those things found within the parent communities that *Novitas* and *Common Table* are reacting against. Yet before taking up these two parts, I must reference a feature of these emerging churches that represents the impact of not only their parent communities, but also the wider ecclesial community—namely, the importance of the weekly worship gathering. Because this is a feature common in many traditions, and because this feature—in and of itself—does not merit an extensive amount of ecclesial reflection in this

⁷²⁷ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p. 7.

⁷²⁸ Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, p. 34.

thesis, I reference it here briefly. In fact, I only chose to acknowledge the noteworthiness of this particular feature due to the fact that it runs counter to other emerging church research. In Gibbs and Bolger's work on emerging churches, they argue that, unlike 'traditional church', emerging communities 'confront deeply entrenched notions that church signifies a performance-based gathering', and therefore many of these groups 'have moved away from a central gathering'.⁷²⁹ Significantly then, before turning to the impact of their parent communities, I wish to point out that, as demonstrated in the earlier depictions of *Novitas* and *Common Table*, the weekly gatherings in fact played a vital role in shaping community life and identity.

Those Things in Parent Communities that Shape Emerging Churches

As the depictions of *Novitas* and *Common Table* reveal, a distinguishable condition of eclecticism existed in these emerging communities. Both communities borrowed widely from various Christian traditions in the process of shaping their own ecclesiological distinctiveness, with the most prominent displays of eclecticism occurring during their formal liturgies. For instance, as the accounts in chapters four and five indicate, during my participation with these communities I encountered lively discussions of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, confessional prayers from the U.S. Episcopal Church's *Book of Common Prayer*, nights of silent meditation, agape meals, a 'minister's liturgy' developed from an amalgamation of a number of ordination rites and ceremonies, extended sessions reciting *The Jesus Prayer*, candle lighting ceremonies derived from the liturgies of the Iona Community, and an enactment of a Roman Catholic house blessing during an Epiphany celebration. As also seen in the previous chapters, these assorted ecclesial practices were intermixed with ambient music and lighting, imaginative video excerpts projected on a screen, extended dialogues and brief homilies surrounding a set scriptural text, kinetically oriented practices such as painting or contemplative walking, Eucharistic celebrations, and communal singing. Although uncommon in the *Novitas*

⁷²⁹ According to Gibbs and Bolger, because these communities do not have regularly scheduled meetings, the participants will actually meet together more often than those participating in formally organized churches. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (London: SPCK, 2006), p. 102.

community, the singing at *Common Table* ranged from contemporary ‘praise songs’ to long-established hymns; from traditional spirituals to popular rock and folk music. Even so, the overall arrangement of these musical pieces was based on the *Holy Eucharist* liturgy in the U.S. Episcopal Church’s *Book of Common Prayer*.

This eclectic liturgical blending often resulted in whiplash for a researcher attempting to ecclesiastically situate the emerging church phenomenon. At one moment these communities presented themselves as being ancient, contemplative, catholic; the next they appeared experimental, chaotic, evangelical; and still yet at other times they displayed hints of being traditional, academic, reformed. What is more, in addition to liturgical borrowings, these communities also, at times, articulated an eclectic conception of what it means to exist as church—appropriating diverse ecclesiological understandings to shape a distinct identity for themselves. I will return to these diverse conceptions of church in the below section on *Novitas* and *Common Table*’s impact on their parent communities, but for a curious example of this ecclesiastically eclectic identity in the literature of emerging church, consider the subtitle of Brian McLaren’s popular work *A Generous Orthodoxy*. In this text, McLaren, who speaks on behalf of, and to emerging church, seeks to offer and explanation for:

Why I am a missional + evangelical + post/ protestant + liberal/ conservative + mystical/ poetic + biblical + charismatic/ contemplative + fundamentalist/ calvinist + anabaptist/ anglican + methodist + catholic + green +incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian.⁷³⁰

Although a survey of his entire text will lead one to interpret McLaren’s subtitle as rhetorical hyperbole, the blending of ecclesial identities remains a discernable feature in the particular communities with which I participated.

Given the experimental nature of these communities—along with their broad appropriation of liturgical elements and diverse blending of ecclesial understandings—locating the particular impact of their parent tradition is challenging. Yet, even though *Novitas* and *Common Table* borrowed widely from a

⁷³⁰ Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).

number of traditions, they still maintained distinct marks inherited from these parent communities. As seen in the depiction of these emerging churches, some of the marks left by the parent communities are quite clear. For instance, the depictions in chapters four and five show how both *Novitas* and *Common Table* maintained certain aspects of the baptismal practices found their parent churches—selecting not to abandon these practices in their emergence from these communities. Although *Common Table* brought a more sacramental emphasis to their understanding of baptism, they still maintained the credobaptist perspective of their parent community. Likewise, specific understandings of ordination were also maintained in these emerging churches. Again, as seen in the earlier depictions, several leading participants in *Novitas* and *Common Table* were either ordained or candidating for ordination. In the case of *Novitas*, these participants were ordained (or seeking ordination) in the *Methodist Church* or the *Church of England*, and, as with the case of baptism, when it came to Eucharistic celebrations, these communities selected not to reinterpret this practice—maintaining that ordained presbyters are to preside. While the stipulation of ordination for Eucharistic presidency was not present in the *Common Table* community, their understanding of ordination and Eucharistic presidency would not be out of harmony with a non-denominational free church understanding. In fact, as noted in chapter five, for *Common Table*, much of the free church characteristics that make up their ‘free church-sacramental’ identity are distinctions inherited their from their parent tradition. Yet, for this present section, I simply wish to distinguish baptism and ordination as distinct ways in which the parent traditions have impacted the ecclesial understandings of these emerging communities.

Another way that these emerging churches have been impacted by their parent tradition can be seen in their resolute fondness for the local cities of Wellingham and Springfield. As depicted in chapters four and five, this fondness for these local cities was born out of the communities’ missional impulses. While missional endeavours are certainly not unique to the evangelical tradition, they do represent an essential quality of this tradition—namely, the quality of activism (i.e, the expression of the gospel in effort). Still, the way in which this activism was expressed in *Novitas* and *Common Table* differed from the way in which their parent communities expressed it. According to Bebbington, activism in the evangelical tradition flowed out of the

idea of conversion and centred on the desire for the conversion of others.⁷³¹ Yet, the form this activism took in the missional endeavours of *Novitas* and *Common Table* did not carry this same emphasis. Instead, as the discussion of mission on the websites of these communities indicates, and as the practices of these communities confirm, the missional focus of these emerging churches was more centred on the transformation of the cities of Wellingham and Springfield.⁷³² Still, this desire to participate with God where God is already working in their local contexts—which was repeatedly expressed by both communities—can be seen as a form of activism inherited from their parent tradition.

Before turning towards those things in the parent communities that these emerging churches are reacting against, there is another—perhaps more subtle—ecclesial mark that has been left on *Novitas* and *Common Table* by their parent tradition. This particular impact comes to the fore when considering the appropriation of liturgical elements in these churches. Despite their eclectic blending of rituals from the more visually and aesthetically oriented wings of the churches, (i.e., ‘high church’ elements), both communities remained robustly verbal in their gatherings, relying extensively on extemporaneously spoken words, written texts, or lyrical music in the enactment of their liturgies—resembling the ‘low church’ practices of their parent evangelical tradition. This reliance on words can also be seen in the extensive amount of ‘conversation’ that took place in both communities. What is more, whenever visual features were introduced or incorporated into the liturgies of the communities, they would be accompanied by verbal commentary denoting their significance. Thus, in harmony with more ‘low church’ approaches, meaning making for those participating in these communities predominately occurred in the verbal realms.

Those Things in Parent Communities that Emerging Churches React Against

Locating the impact of the parent communities on emerging churches is not accomplished merely by considering those features that the two share in common. In

⁷³¹ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p. 10.

⁷³² See the discussion of ‘mission’ on the websites of *Common Table* and *Novitas* in chapters four and five. See also the feature of ‘missional focus’ in those same chapters.

fact, both *Novitas* and *Common Table* have been significantly shaped by those things in their parent tradition that they have rejected. The following consideration of these things not only helps answer the question of why the participants in these emerging churches left their parent communities, but it also goes a long way in beginning to point towards what it is these emerging churches might be able to contribute to their parent tradition.

Returning to the narratives of emergence that were presented in chapters four and five, similar themes developed across the individual accounts—revealing the frustrations that participants experienced in their parent communities, and the desires that were driving their involvement in emerging church. A major focus of these frustrations, which participants sought to redress in their emerging communities, centred on their experiences of a rigid, narrow, limited, or insular way of approaching Christian practice, doctrine, and belief. Significantly, participants stressed how questions were not permitted in their parent communities, and how ‘proper’ doctrinal belief served as a boundary marker for inclusion. Thus, to have doubts relating to Christian belief, or to question evangelical doctrines placed participants outside the bounds of the community. This particular approach to ecclesial life, which envisions community members in either ‘in’ or ‘out’ categories, corresponds with Bebbington’s articulation of conversionism described above. Therefore the experiences these participants had in their parent communities can be corroborated by these wider understandings of evangelicalism.

These experiences, arising from participants’ involvement in their parent tradition, clearly impacted *Novitas* and *Common Table*. Indeed, as seen in the depictions in chapters four and five of this thesis, these emerging churches sought to create a space for inclusion and diversity of belief—where one could ask questions and explore faith in the midst of doubt. Thus, in distinction to the more rigid boundaries for inclusion found in their parent communities—which required participants to adhere to particular beliefs in order to belong—these communities sought to be a place where questions could be asked, and those who doubted could be included. Also, in distinction to their parent communities’ more limited and narrow approach to Christianity, the participants of *Novitas* and *Common Table* sought a more diverse approach—borrowing widely from a number of distinct ecclesial traditions. As

evidenced in the earlier depictions, participants found both of these distinctions meaningful in their experience of emerging church. In the section that follows, I give more focused attention to these two distinctions. In doing so, I consider the way in which these distinctions could contribute to the parent communities' understanding of church.

The Impact of Novitas and Common Table on Parent Communities

I have now reached the point in the thesis where I consider the impact that these emerging churches can have on their parent communities (*area 4c*). In considering this impact, I focus on the contributions that *Novitas* and *Common Table* make to the understanding of church in their parent tradition. These contributions flow out of the above exchange that has taken place between these emerging churches and their parent communities. In particular, I focus on how the parent communities' understanding of church can be expanded through a consideration of the ways in which these emerging churches have sought to redress their experiences in the evangelical tradition. In redressing these experiences *Novitas* and *Common Table* have, (1) developed more ecclesial diversity through borrowing and appropriating practices and beliefs from other Christian traditions, and (2) created spaces for theological discussion, intellectual enquiry, and spiritual doubt.

In the sections that follow, I discuss the implications that these two features have for the understanding of church found in the parent communities of *Novitas* and *Common Table*. Since these features also have consequences for these emerging churches, I discuss the ecclesial implications they have for *Novitas* and *Common Table* as well.

Church as a Space of Ecclesial Borrowing and Blending

In response to the more limited and insular ways of approaching Christianity found in their parent communities, *Novitas* and *Common Table* sought to diversify their ecclesial experiences by borrowing widely from a range of Christian practices and belief. This borrowing and appropriating of practices and beliefs from other Christian traditions—which *Novitas* and *Common Table* participants found meaningful in their experiences of emerging church—was detailed in the depictions of these communities in chapters four and five. Furthermore, as introduced earlier in

this chapter, this borrowing resulted in a distinguishable condition of eclecticism in these communities, as both drew from various Christian traditions in the process of shaping their own ecclesiological distinctiveness.

When considering what this eclectic appropriation of Christian belief and practice can contribute to their parent communities understanding of church, I focus my attention on several related questions concerning ecclesial identity: Have these emerging churches adopted another ecclesial identity in their emergence from their parent tradition? In other words, by appropriating these practices and beliefs, are they leaving behind their evangelical identities in order to become something else—such as ‘Mainline Episcopalian’, ‘Anglo-Catholic’, or ‘Anabaptist’? Or are these emerging communities developing a new ecclesial identity altogether—an identity distinct from both their parent communities’ evangelicalism as well as other recognized ecclesial identities? Furthermore, if the parent communities seek to follow the emerging communities in diversifying their ecclesial practices by borrowing from other traditions, will they too be forced to abandon their own evangelical identity? In other words, does ecclesial appropriation and blending threaten the evangelical distinctiveness of their parent communities?

In assessing these questions, I turn to the notion of hybridity. I first consider the way in which this concept has developed out of postmodern, postcolonial thought. I then consider the ways in which it can be applied in various academic disciplines. Finally, I bring hybridity into an ecclesial context—focusing first on how the concept has been employed by other theologians, and then focusing on how it can be employed in this research to better understand the contributions of *Novitas* and *Common Table*.

Hybridity in Emerging Churches

As emphasized in the first chapter, emerging churches have sought to situate much of their conversation around the ecclesial implications of the cultural transition from modernity to postmodernity. This emphasis invites a cursory examination of the dominant features found in those things called ‘postmodern’. Entering guardedly into the language of critical discourse surrounding various cultural tendencies of late

1950s and early 1960s, the term ‘postmodern’ was originally affixed adjectively to art, literature, and architecture.⁷³³ Importantly, the term *postmodern*, as employed in these instances, was first coined by British historian Arnold Toynbee in the 1930s, but did not gain widespread usage until several decades later.⁷³⁴ Since those early manifestations, the appellation has flourished in a diversity of directions, being broadened to include an expanding scope of cultural phenomena and academic deliberation. The more radically visible occurrences of this development appeared in the architectural realm, where many of the early theoretical confrontations surrounding postmodernism were expressed.⁷³⁵ These occurrences included a pluralism of technique and the mixing of categories and genres in an eclectic style that simultaneously ‘consulted’, ‘plundered’, ‘lovingly revived’ and ‘ridiculed’ the past.⁷³⁶ In broadening this analysis of the postmodern condition beyond the sphere of architecture, postmodern theorist Jean-François Lyotard argued that, ‘Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture’.⁷³⁷ He writes, ‘one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and “retro” clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games’.⁷³⁸ Thus, no matter what path a researcher takes in perusing the nebulous environs of ‘the postmodern’, she or he will most certainly cut across themes associated with eclecticism. Indeed, as Perry Anderson reminds his readers, ‘the universe of the postmodern is not one of delimitation, but intermixture—celebrating the cross-over, the hybrid, the pot-pourri.’⁷³⁹

⁷³³ Hans Bertens, “The Postmodern *Weltanschauung* and Its Relation to Modernism: An Introductory Story,” in *A Postmodern Reader*, ed. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 25, 42.

⁷³⁴ Graham Ward, “Introduction Or, a Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” in *The Postmodern God: a Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. xxiii. See: Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. 5 (London: Oxford University Press, 1939).

⁷³⁵ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” in *A Postmodern Reader*, ed. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (Albany: State University of New York, 1993), p. 313.

⁷³⁶ Charles Jencks, “The Post-Modern Agenda,” in *The Post-Modern Reader*, ed. Charles Jencks (London: Academy Editions, 1992), p. 23.

⁷³⁷ Jean François Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?,” in *Postmodern Debates*, ed. Simon Malpas (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), p. 57.

⁷³⁸ Lyotard, “What is Postmodernism?,” p. 57.

⁷³⁹ Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 93.

In the following sections, I analyse the eclectic mixing taking place in postmodern contexts through the lens of hybridity, a concept used to describe a wide range of social phenomenon related to the appropriation and blending of various cultural features. Through this analysis, I detail how the notion of hybridity emerged in the social sciences, and I introduce the theories most frequently associated with the use of this term. In an effort to demonstrate the full extent of hybridity's influence across a wide spectrum of disciplines, I trace the trajectory of this concept from its heritage as a term in biology to its ever-growing application in the social and human sciences.

Hybridity Defined

While most frequently associated with postcolonial theory and cultural studies—where it has become a central concept in discussions of cultural identity and appropriation⁷⁴⁰—hybridity represents an attractive theory for those working in diverse fields such as anthropology, literature, geography, art history, musicology, and religious studies.⁷⁴¹ As a term, hybridity finds its origins in the natural sciences—particularly in the disciplines of botany and zoology—where it was employed to describe the product that occurred as a result of the cross mixing of two distinct species.⁷⁴² Because the biological use of the term hybrid expanded to include humans, it developed a formidable 'racist and colonialist legacy' that often brings to mind the 'purity anxieties' of a nineteenth century that was fixated upon (and revolted by) racial mixing.⁷⁴³ Nikos Papastergiadis demonstrates well how these previously held notions of race, racial purity and identity served as an obstacle for extensive engagements with theories of hybridity:

For as long as the concepts of purity and exclusivity have been central to a racialised theory of identity, hybridity has, in one way or another, served as a threat to the fullness of selfhood. The hybrid has often been positioned within or beside modern theories of human origin and

⁷⁴⁰ Annie E. Coombes and Avtar Brah, "Introduction: the Conundrum of 'Mixing'," in *Hybridity and Its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture*, eds. Annie E. Coombes and Avtar Brah (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 1.

⁷⁴¹ Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), p. 5.

⁷⁴² Coombes and Brah, "Conundrum of 'Mixing'," p. 3.

⁷⁴³ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Regulated Improvisation: Ecclesial Hybridity and the Unity of the Church," in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 270.

social development, mostly appearing as the moral marker of contamination, failure, or regression.⁷⁴⁴

Nevertheless, in an attempt to make sense of disparate cultural features persisting in an increasingly more globalized world, the deployment of the term hybrid has traversed beyond ‘the loaded discourse of race’ to ‘a more neutral zone of identity’.⁷⁴⁵ Through this migration, hybridity has now come to signify the ‘productive emergence of new cultural forms which have derived from apparently mutual “borrowings”, exchanges and intersections across ethnic boundaries’.⁷⁴⁶ Thus, hybridity is presently being used in the social sciences to describe the phenomenon of blending two or more identities in order to shape an altogether new identity.⁷⁴⁷ This mixing is such that even though something new is created, the original differences are still visible (as in a hybrid language that still contains the decipherable aspects of the two blended languages).⁷⁴⁸

Hybridity Applied

The application of this more recent conception of hybridity is extensive—with an increasing number of social theorists finding agreement with one another on the nature of the developing global culture. Most now seek to affirm that the global culture exists as a hybrid mixture of heterogeneous cultural elements as opposed to the previously espoused modern notion of an emerging universal culture.⁷⁴⁹ What is more, according to the argumentation of the theorists who seek to describe *every* identity as existing in some kind of hybrid state, even the constituent cultural identities that combine to make up this hybrid global culture are themselves hybrids.⁷⁵⁰ In fact, the postcolonial theorist Edward Said has notably asserted that,

⁷⁴⁴ Nikos Papastergiadis, “Tracing Hybridity in Theory,” in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, ed. Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: Zed Books, 1997), p. 257.

⁷⁴⁵ Papastergiadis, “Tracing Hybridity,” p. 257.

⁷⁴⁶ Coombes and Brah, “Conundrum of ‘Mixing’,” p. 9.

⁷⁴⁷ Christopher Baker, *The Hybrid Church in the City: Third Space Thinking*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2009), p. 26.

⁷⁴⁸ McClintock Fulkerson, “They Will Know,” p. 270.

⁷⁴⁹ Marwan Kraidy suggests that this growing consensus not only questions the claims that local cultural traditions are eradicated by foreign influences, but also doubts the notion that local cultures can be completely resilient to these influences. The apparent outcome of this ambivalent interpretation is an acknowledgement of hybrid cultures. Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity: Or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), p. 45.

⁷⁵⁰ Papastergiadis, “Tracing Hybridity,” p. 257.

‘all cultures are involved in one another, none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic.’⁷⁵¹

Although the credit for dislodging the concept of hybridity from the strict confines of the biological sciences is often attributed to the isolated works of particular scholars such as Said (or Homi Bhabha⁷⁵²), the wider project of the postcolonial critique has itself contributed significantly in re-popularizing this concept, and it has gone a long way in disseminating its principles throughout the social sciences.⁷⁵³ For instance, a central issue undergoing re-evaluation through postcolonial analysis is the modern attempt to understand the concept of identity through the use of mutually exclusive categories that identify human beings as either black or white, civilized or primitive, rich or poor, whole or disabled, native or alien, Christian or pagan, etc.⁷⁵⁴ In this context, postcolonial theorists frequently marshal notions of hybridity in their attempt to challenge these binary concepts that suggest pure and unmixed identities.⁷⁵⁵ In their analysis, hybridity is something that remains unavoidable, and as a result of the indistinctness produced by hybrid identities there exists extraordinary potential for resisting these mutually exclusive classifications.⁷⁵⁶ Yet for this thesis, considering the ways in which hybridity can be employed in ecclesial context is the focus. Thus, I now turn my attention to this consideration.

Hybridity in Ecclesial Contexts

The exercise of making explicit connections between understandings of church and contemporary theories associated with cultural hybridity is not an undertaking unique to my research. In fact, making connections between hybridity and churches is not even unique to the theological disciplines, as cultural studies scholars have also undertaken this exercise. Yet, whenever cultural specialists attempt to bring theories

⁷⁵¹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. xxv.

⁷⁵² Homi K. Bhabha *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁷⁵³ Kraidy, *Hybridity*, pp. 46, 57.

⁷⁵⁴ Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner and Mayra Rivera, “Alien/Nation, Liberation, and the Postcolonial Underground,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2004), p. 11.

⁷⁵⁵ Coombes and Brah, “Conundrum of ‘Mixing’,” p. 1.

⁷⁵⁶ Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, “Alien/Nation,” p. 13.

of hybridity into contact with the particulars of ecclesial settings, the resulting analysis often centres on perceivable instances of syncretism between the religious-cultural practices of an indigenous people and the distinct practices and beliefs of an infiltrating Christianity. An example of this tendency can be found throughout Peter Burke's survey, where—in an attempt to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the cultural condition of hybridity—he repeatedly cites specific instances of Non-Western societies retaining key elements of their traditional religious practices when converting to Christianity.⁷⁵⁷ In studies such as these, where an in-depth survey of hybridity exists as the principal aim, incidences of syncretism are recognized as productive sites for theoretical reflection and analysis. Yet, because of hybridity's association with qualities of syncretism, and because of the negative connotations associated with that term in Christianity—a term that in the words of missiologist Robert Schreiter, 'still summons up for many Christians images of compromising Christian faith or harmonizing faith with its environment at any cost'—ecclesiologists have made only negligible advancements in utilizing notions of hybridity in their own work.⁷⁵⁸

Schreiter, along with practical theologians such as Christopher Baker and Mary McClintock Fulkerson, stand as exceptions to this general reluctance to ecclesialogically engage with the concept of hybridity. Indeed, the significant works of Schreiter and Baker make extensive use of hybridity as a crucial theory in negotiating ecclesial identity within the contexts of local cultures. Schreiter's project in particular seeks to offer a more translucent portrait of the processes of syncretism with the aim of better understanding the complex struggles to develop an identity that remains authentic to culture and faithful to Christianity.⁷⁵⁹ While much of Schreiter's work centres upon intercultural communication in the context of global Christianity, Baker focuses the greater part of his efforts on exploring the church in Western, post-Christian urban contexts. In analysing this contemporary situation, Baker draws upon the theory of hybridity to argue for the necessary emergence of a productive 'third space'—that is, a space existing as a hybrid between church and culture—that

⁷⁵⁷ See: Burke, *Cultural Hybridity*.

⁷⁵⁸ Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 62.

⁷⁵⁹ Schreiter, *New Catholicity*, p. 83.

will remain open to the formation of vital partnerships essential for forging social ethics.⁷⁶⁰

These two projects represent a valuable contribution to research in the intersection of hybridity and ecclesiology. However, their focus upon hybrid states of identity that result from interactions between churches and local cultures does not fully capture the intermixing that took place in *Novitas* and *Common Table*. While the depictions in chapters four and five do reveal that these emerging churches blended music, songs, films, and videos from the wider cultural arena into their liturgies, they also blended diverse practices from distinct faith traditions. In this thesis, I focus my attention on the hybrid states that developed in these emerging communities as a result of their practice of intermixing one Christian tradition with another.

Before continuing with the development of my own particular presentation of hybridity in these emerging churches, a brief examination of the way in which Mary McClintock Fulkerson appropriates the concept of hybridity is also useful, as she too—in line with my approach to practical theology—focuses on the theological implications embedded in the practices of an actual faith community. In her ethnographic study of a burgeoning Methodist congregation in the United States, she draws extensively upon notions of hybridity in an attempt to discern a stable identity for this exceptionally diverse community.⁷⁶¹ Yet, while her enquiry remains focused upon the various discourses that each *individual* participant brings into the community and how this mixes with other *individual* discourses to create something new, my investigation of *Novitas* and *Common Table* focuses on the various individual *and communal* discourses being blended together in these emerging churches. In the following section, I consider the blending of these discourse in *Novitas* and *Common Table*, focusing particularly on the hybrid ecclesial identities that develop as a result.

⁷⁶⁰ Baker, *Hybrid Church*, p. 111.

⁷⁶¹ McClintock Fulkerson's site of research was a church in the United Methodist tradition that brought together participants from divergent classes, church traditions, and ethnic backgrounds. This community was also comprised of a significant number of participants with physical disabilities. McClintock Fulkerson, "They Will Know," pp. 265-79.

Earlier in this chapter I rehearsed the experimentation and borrowing that took place in the development of the liturgies of *Novitas* and *Common Table*. I also discussed how these communities maintained a space for a mixture of belief to exist. Both of these features point towards the hybrid nature of these emerging churches. Yet, beyond the eclectic appropriation of liturgical practices and the mixture of theological discourses permeating these communities, there existed a blending of ecclesial identity in *Novitas* and *Common Table*. In this section, I focus my attention on the noticeable degree of paradox that was exhibited by participants when articulating and interpreting the particular nature of their own community and practice. By drawing upon ecclesial language and impulses that ranged from the free church or Anabaptist end of the denominational spectrum, to language and impulses more consistent with Roman Catholic or Anglo-Catholic sensibilities, participants in both communities, when reflecting upon the essential identity of their churches, continued in their eclectic blending of various Christian traditions. The result of this was the emergence of a hybrid ecclesial identity in these communities.

Yet, before conducting an analysis of the hybrid identities that surfaced in the communities of *Novitas* and *Common Table*, a concise survey, which takes into consideration the fuller range of ecclesiological identity, is needed. Indeed, within the wider Christian community today, there exists a multitude of ecclesial identities. Recognizable by creed, polity, liturgy, geography, ethnicity or nationality, the existence of these distinct identities makes it possible for one to speak meaningfully about being a Catholic, a Protestant, a Presbyterian, a Methodist, an Anglican, an evangelical, or a Charismatic (to name but a few). Yet, in order to make sense of the differing conceptions of church that exist across a range of Christian traditions, I draw once again upon the work of Roger Haight, who has conducted a helpful comparative evaluation of ecclesiological identity using the binary ends of the denominational spectrum.

In the latter portions of his study of the Christian community in history, Haight takes up the fruitful exercise of exploring the ecclesiology of Anabaptist and Baptist churches—an outlook commonly identified as ‘free church ecclesiology’—and then

contrasts it with early modern Roman Catholic ecclesiology, which he labels as a ‘universal institutional church ecclesiology’.⁷⁶² According to Haight, these two ecclesiologies stand as broad types, representing the ‘opposite ends of a spectrum of conceptions of the church that marked the great church’ at the end of the sixteenth century.⁷⁶³ Consequently, these two types should be understood to epitomize the poles, and hence all other denominational ecclesiologies would exist at some point in-between these two on the spectrum.⁷⁶⁴ Other comparative endeavours have made similar use of typologies when considering the various ecclesiological distinctions of Christian communities. Among the more influential of these typologies is the church-type and sect-type, first introduced by Max Weber and later propagated by figures such as Ernst Troeltsch and H. Richard Niebuhr.⁷⁶⁵ I have selected Haight’s typologies due to the fact that his work—with its ecclesiological focus on the historically situated understandings of church—fits well with the overall approach taken in this thesis.

Taking up Haight’s analysis of the polar ends of the denominational spectrum, understandings of church that are typified by the free church end of this scale emphasize the individual’s faith relation to God as most important, and it is these individuals coming together that constitute the Christian community. In contrast, universal institutional understandings of church accentuate the visible, social and institutional character of the Christian community, and it is this society and its confession of faith that people gather around and recognize as ‘church’. Because the Christian community is conceived of this way, universal institutional understandings of church give emphasis to the universality and uniformity of the church, and thus the local congregation is not the church *per se*, but rather a part or extension of the

⁷⁶² The following synopsis of Haight’s research can be found in Roger Haight, S.J., *Christian Community in History*, vol. 2: Comparative Ecclesiology (New York: Continuum, 2005), pp. 218-288.

⁷⁶³ The choice for focusing on the divergent ecclesiologies of the church as it emerged from the sixteenth century is significant for Haight who argues that ‘no other century comes close to the importance of this one for the development of the whole church, especially in the West, as it moved into the modern period’. Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 2, pp. 218, 219.

⁷⁶⁴ Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 2, p. 277.

⁷⁶⁵ See: For an account of the relationship between Weber’s project and the projects of Troeltsch and Niebuhr, see: Theodore M. Steeman, “Church, Sect, Mysticism, Denomination Periodological Aspects of Troeltsch’s Types,” *Sociological Analysis* 36, no. 3 (1975): pp. 181-204; and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “A Formal Model of Church and Sect,” *American Journal of Sociology* 94, no. 5 (1988): pp. 241-68.

one universal church. Free church understandings of church on the other hand, put the accent upon the free association of its members with the local Christian community. This voluntary association means that the local congregation is an autonomous community and therefore represents the primary referent of the word 'church' in free church understandings.

Continuing with Haight's analysis, free church understandings of church also stand in contrast to universal institutional understandings by their suspicion of external forms of devotion such as sacrifice and ritual. It consequently favours a spiritual interiority where 'the Spirit of God at work within the human spirit constitutes the essence of Christianity'.⁷⁶⁶ By comparison, universal institutional understandings of church stress the external signs of grace primarily made visible through the sacraments. As a result of these distinctions, free church understandings of church emphasize the existential holiness of the community, particularly as it is achieved through the ethical lives of its members. Thus, the church strives to become a congregation comprised of upright individuals. Conversely, the understanding of church arising from the universal institutional end of the spectrum stress the holiness of the church—comprised of its doctrines and sacraments—over the holiness of the church's individual members. Thus, the basis for holiness is not found in the personal holiness of individuals, but in God's presence in the institution that God established.

The conceptions of the Christian community outlined in the above paragraph also provide the basis for determining how these two approaches to church consider the church's relationship to the world. Because of the free church insistence upon the partition between the church and the state, it has often held a non-cooperative stance towards society at large. This results in the church possessing either an indifferent or a hostile relationship with the world. In contrast, universal institutional understandings of church conceive of the church as a visible social entity and an integral part of the world in which it is situated. While this notion may at times result in the accusation that the church is compromising certain Christian values, it

⁷⁶⁶ Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 2, p. 280.

produces a prolific amount of participation by church members within the whole of society.

Using these insights from Haight's typologies as a valuable guide in assessing the ecclesial identity of actual Christian communities, I now turn my attention towards the articulations and the activities of *Novitas* and *Common Table*, demonstrating the emergence of a hybrid identity within these two communities. In line with the approach to practical theology taken in this thesis, the participant's own articulations of church, as well as the actual practices of these communities, are treated as ecclesiological data. By examining this data, I establish the presence of ecclesiastically hybrid identities in these emerging churches—showing that *Novitas* and *Common Table* drew from both ends of the denominational spectrum when formulating their core self-conceptions and when living out their understandings of church.

Returning to the depiction of *Novitas* and *Common Table* in chapters four and five, these communities can be seen to oscillate between certain free church assumptions and particular assumptions more in line with the universal institutional side of the denominational spectrum. For instance, I return to comments made by Dave when he was speaking about the relationship between the community called 'church' and the wider human society:

Novitas has a positive relationship with the world. If there was a line—you know, a syncretism / dualism line—we'd be more on the... closer to the syncretism end. Not that we want to be syncretistic, but on that spectrum we'll be closer there because we affirm that God is living and active and present in the world. The world is seen as a positive place, a place to engage with, and a place to affirm—which I rejoice in because I want to say that world is a good place rather than... you know, bad, bad, bad things happen, but that doesn't mean the whole of creation is tarnished—is a bad place.⁷⁶⁷

This positive stance towards the created world and human society pervades the thoughts and activities of both of these communities and it exists as a clearly discernable element in the construction of their ecclesiological identities. It can be

⁷⁶⁷ Dave, interview by author, Wellingham, 2 April 2009, Dave transcript, turn 152.

seen in their inclusion of cultural artefacts such as film clips and popular rock and folk songs in their liturgies. It can also be seen in the fondness they exhibited towards the local communities of Wellingham and Springfield. Furthermore, the comments from participants such as Barbara (*Novitas*) and Charles (*Common Table*) demonstrate how the way in which the positive posture these emerging communities took towards the surrounding cultures motivated the participants to take part. After stressing the disconnect she experienced between ‘church’ and ‘culture’ in her parent tradition, Barbara revealed, ‘I wanted to use my contemporary culture in my worship, in my faith life, and not see a disconnect between the way I live and who I am, and the culture I live in and the context I respond to, and my faith.’⁷⁶⁸ Similarly, Charles found the openness that *Common Table* had towards the ‘secular academic world’ that he had entered meaningful. This can be demonstrated by returning to his story of emergence, where Charles remarked:

So I was facing a lot of intellectual discourse that I felt faith should apply to, but I didn't feel as if I had yet participated in a faith tradition that really took that engagement seriously. So, finding *Common Table* as a place where I felt it was OK to ask essentially any question that you had, and OK to engage in that dialogue—not just within, you know, ‘these are the voices and the scholars that are OK to engage with’, but to move outside of that and sort of really be open about how faith applies to my academic discipline, and other disciplines, and theology and life and science, or whatever, and have it all on the table I think was really important.⁷⁶⁹

These above practices and understandings of church reveal how both *Novitas* and *Common Table* endeavored to live out their ecclesial identity as communities that would not shun or ignore the wider human society.

Yet, despite their positive stance towards the wider local culture, there also remained strong aspirations within these communities towards a different conception and enactment of the church’s relationship to society—which reveals an understanding of church more in line with Anabaptist or free church identities. Again, Dave’s comments from chapter four are illustrative: ‘the church is a counter-cultural

⁷⁶⁸ Barbara, interview by author, Wellingham, 18 March 2009, Barbara transcript, turn 18.

⁷⁶⁹ Charles, interview by author, Springfield, 10 July 2009, Charles transcript, turn 40.

community... I warm to that'.⁷⁷⁰ Putting words to the attitudes found in his emerging community, he continued:

The church as an alternative society which models something different. The church as an alternative community which challenges a dominant consciousness of that which is around it. Aspirationally, I would like *Novitas* to do that, but whether it does or not—well I'm sure at times it doesn't.⁷⁷¹

Despite Dave's concern, there were in fact instances where this model of church as an alternative community that challenges a dominant consciousness was realized in both *Novitas* and *Common Table*. Examples of this can be seen in the way these communities participated in the *Fulcrum Café* forty-day exhibition, which sought to prophetically question the isolated existence associated with city centre culture, and the *Our City Care* demonstration protest, which sought to call into question the dominant lending practices of local financial institutions. Although only a small number of *Common Table* participants engaged in this protest, it resonates with the community's stated aims from their website to move beyond the perspective of the surrounding 'affluent, western culture'.

Furthermore, the way in which the notion 'free church-sacramental' was embodied in the practices and language of the *Common Table* community also serves as an example of the hybrid makeup of this emerging church. As demonstrated in chapter five, this community blended free church components of church polity and baptismal practice, with more sacramental notions of Eucharistic celebration and liturgy. Still, given the unique way in which the community enacted their liturgy and Eucharistic celebration, it is necessary to clarify the sacramental nature of this practice. In doing so, I return to the Joe's comments concerning the practice of communion in *Common Table*:

It's not just something that we do out of a kind of remembrance—in the way that remembrance would be thinking fondly or sentimentally about, "oh, sometime in the past, Jesus died, and that was such a great event that we... I don't know why we eat, but we really think hard about it"—but it's to say that it's more of a remembrance that is looking forward and also a repetition of a practice that is central to the

⁷⁷⁰ Dave, turn 90.

⁷⁷¹ Dave, turn 90.

church. I think what we're saying is that there are some specific practices in the life of the church, where the grace of God in Christ is particularly present... to some extent in the Eucharist we're saying that the body of Christ is really present for those who are partaking at the table—that it is the grace of God given as we take the body of Christ into us and ingest it.⁷⁷²

Thus for the *Common Table* community, the understanding of this ritual is noticeably distinct from a free church understanding—which, as argued by Haight, favours a spiritual interiority over external forms of devotion—and further points to the hybrid makeup of this emerging church.

The aspects highlighted above demonstrate the degree of paradox present in the practices and the articulations of church found in these emerging communities. By drawing on both ends of the denominational spectrum in forming their ecclesial identities, these emerging communities have developed a new, hybrid identity. Thus, while they no longer possess the evangelical identity of their parent communities, they have not wholly exchanged this for some other recognized ecclesial identity such as Anglo-Catholic or Anabaptist. I now turn my attention toward the contributions that this more hybrid approach can make to the parent traditions understanding of church.

Contribution of Hybridity for Parent Communities

Due to the intense nature of the appropriation, mixing, and blending that took place in these emerging churches, *Novitas* and *Common Table* have surfaced as promising sites of enquiry into what happens to a church's ecclesial identity when seeking to negotiate an exchange between one tradition and another. Embedded within the practices of these emerging churches are ecclesiological insights for their parent communities. Indeed, a careful look at how a new, hybrid identity developed through these exchanges, reveals something important about the nature of ecclesial identity, and invites the parent communities of these emerging churches to reconsider their understanding of church.

⁷⁷² Joe, interview by author, Springfield, 13 July 2009, Joe transcript, turn 50.

As already emphasized, these emerging churches were reacting to the rigid, narrow, limited, or insular way of approaching Christian practice and belief they experienced in their parent communities. In addressing these frustrations, participants found meaning in the appropriation of diverse practices and beliefs from traditions that differed from their evangelical heritage. Yet, in emerging from something ‘other than evangelical’ through the appropriation of these practices and beliefs, a new ecclesial identity emerged—an identity that was hybrid in nature. The fact that a noticeably hybrid identity developed out of their emergence from their parent communities—as opposed to another, already recognized ecclesial identity—calls into question the stability and rigidity of not only the evangelical identity of their parent communities, but also the stability and rigidity of other ecclesial identities as well.

To be sure, just as postcolonial theorists argue for hybridity’s perpetual existence as a ubiquitous occurrence within the construction of cultural identities, so too have instances of hybridity permeated the long and extensive history of the construction of ecclesial identities. In fact, it has even been argued that the very religion of Christianity itself was one formed as ‘a great hybrid, comprised at the urban crossroads of the Roman Empire’.⁷⁷³ While rehearsing the particulars surrounding specific occurrences of hybridity throughout the history of the Christian community rests well beyond the scope of this thesis, clear practices of churches and traditions appropriating, blending, mixing and borrowing from one another can be attested to in a number of ecclesial contexts. One needs only to consider the Anglo-Catholic tradition—or even the Scoto-Catholic movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century⁷⁷⁴—to appreciate the commonness of this feature. Yet, in contemporary ecclesial contexts, the influences of globalization and ecumenism are combining in such a way as to accelerate instances of these exchanges between churches and traditions. From the perspective of a sociologist such as Martin

⁷⁷³ For these scholars, the emergence of Christianity ‘cannot be understood apart from the extraordinary creativity of its high-risk hybridities—for instance, its “neither Greek nor Jew”—that is, *both Greek and Jewish*, which let it spread like wildfire.’ Keller, Nausner and Rivera, “Alien/Nation,” p. 13.

⁷⁷⁴ See: Stewart J. Brown, “Scoto-Catholic Movement in Presbyterian Worship,” in *Worship and Liturgy in Context: Studies and Case Studies in Theology and Practice*, ed. Duncan Forrester and Doug Gay (London: SCM Press, 2009), pp.152-63.

Stringer, ‘it is no longer possible, within the context of global communication, to live in an isolated, sealed world. Peoples, cultures and discourses meet and interact with each other continuously.’⁷⁷⁵ From an ecclesiastical perspective, the ecumenical movement has had similar effects on the level of interaction between Christian traditions. Indeed, theologians such as Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul Bradshaw have noted that the ‘developing ecumenical openness among both scholars and ecclesial authorities has encouraged many churches to assimilate some of the features of the worship of other traditions.’⁷⁷⁶ The ongoing liturgical influence of the Iona and Taizé communities across a wide-ranging collection of churches serves to further underscore this reality. Surfacing in the midst of this age marked by ecumenism and globalisation, *Novitas* and *Common Table* represent an intensified form of ecclesial hybridity—with appropriation, borrowing, mixing and imitation being the norm for these communities.

Still, *Novitas* and *Common Table*—while exhibiting a high degree of hybridity in their ecclesial makeup—are not the only Christian communities engaging in accelerated forms of appropriation and borrowing. For instance, Diana Butler Bass, drawing upon research conducted in thriving mainline congregations in the United States, noted how these congregations experienced ‘new vibrancy through a reappropriation of historic Christian practices’.⁷⁷⁷ Add to this Phyllis Tickle’s popular account of the converging centre of American religion brought about through the exchange of beliefs and practices across various ecclesiastical traditions in the United States:

American religion had never had a center before, primarily because it was basically Protestant in its Christianity; and Protestantism, with its hallmark characteristic of divisiveness, has never had a center. Now one was emerging, but what was emerging was no longer Protestant. It was no longer any ‘thing’, actually. It was simply itself, a mélange of ‘things’ cherry-picked from each quadrant and put together—some

⁷⁷⁵ Martin D. Stringer, *A Sociological History of Christian Worship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 209-210.

⁷⁷⁶ Paul Bradshaw, Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold, “Preface to Revised Edition,” in *The Study of Liturgy*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, et al. (London: SPCK, 1992), p. xvii.

⁷⁷⁷ Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2004), p. 14.

would say cobbled together—without any original intention and certainly with no design beyond that of conversation.⁷⁷⁸

These instances of reappropriating historic Christian practices and mixing of ‘things cherry-picked’ from other traditions in the United States can also be observed in ecclesiastical contexts in the United Kingdom. Doug Gay draws particular attention to occurrences of liturgical exchange when noting that:

In today’s Scotland, when Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Roman Catholics ‘visit’ each other’s services (whether during ecumenical events or in the course of rites of passage such as baptisms, weddings and funerals, where they attend as friends, relatives and neighbours) increasingly, they recognize many common elements within one another’s liturgies, something which still seems to come with a degree of surprise.⁷⁷⁹

The fact that these cases of liturgical exchange are still met with a degree of surprise in churches today highlights the potential that hybridity has for opening up fresh understandings of church.

In exploring this potential—with a particular focus on how the hybridity present in *Novitas* and *Common Table* invites the parent communities of these emerging churches to reconsider their understanding of church—I return to the above discussion on ecclesial identity. In this earlier discussion, I maintained that a number of diverse ecclesial identities existed within the wider Christian community. Indeed, this recognition of numerous identities has made it possible to speak of ecclesial communities as being Catholic, Protestant, Presbyterian, Methodist, Evangelical, Charismatic, etc. As important as these distinctions are, the concept of hybridity suggests that these identities should not be interpreted as firmly bounded traditions, born out of isolation and existing in a self-generated, pure and unmixed state. Instead, these distinct ecclesial identities have emerged through relational encounters taking place between two or more ecclesial communities. This directly challenges the more narrow and insular understanding of church that was present in the parent communities of *Novitas* and *Common Table*. Indeed, the hybrid exchange taking

⁷⁷⁸ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2008), p. 134.

⁷⁷⁹ Doug Gay, “Conclusion: Emerging Contexts for Christian Worship,” in *Worship and Liturgy in Context: Studies and Case Studies in Theology and Practice*, ed. Duncan Forrester and Doug Gay (London: SCM Press, 2009), p. 283.

place in these emerging churches brings to the fore many of the common elements that exist across the liturgies of different churches, and thus invites their parent communities to consider the ways in which their own evangelical tradition has actually been formed, in part, through these ecclesial exchanges. To deny the possibility that they have been formed through ecclesial exchanges, and instead to maintain a narrow and insular understanding of church, these parent communities must ignore that which is true of all churches—namely, that they themselves exist as a hybrid. Yet, by recognizing the ways in which their evangelical tradition has been formed through ecclesial exchanges, these parent communities could move towards a more open understanding of church, which appreciates the diversity present in the Christian tradition and seeks to learn from other ecclesial communities. This would begin to allow these parent communities to see church as a space of exchange as opposed to a space of insulation. Not only would this invite a posture of learning in these parent communities, but this understanding of church also has the potential to move conversations between the parent communities and other churches from an ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ affair, to something much more relational and mutually enriching. This mutually enriching exchange would also allow these parent communities to better see what it is they have to offer to the wider Christian tradition. Since hybrid exchanges allow for the original differences of the two identities mixing together to remain visible, the distinctly evangelical contribution in these ecclesial exchanges can be seen and appreciated. In fact, throughout the appropriation processes of *Novitas* and *Common Table*, traces of their evangelical heritage clearly remained—making a noticeable contribution to the hybrid identity of these churches. Thus, instead of seeing instances of mixing and exchange as a threat to the distinctiveness of their tradition, the parent communities of *Novitas* and *Common Table* could welcome these instances of mixing and exchange, seeing them as opportunities to leave their fingerprints on the wider Christian tradition.

Church as a Space for Discussion, Enquiry, and Doubt

In the closing sections of this chapter, I return to the frustrations that emerging church participants experienced in their parent communities—namely, their experiences of a rigid, narrow, limited, or insular way of approaching Christian practice, doctrine, and belief. In doing so, I consider a second way that participants sought to redress, in their emerging communities, the frustrations they experienced in their parent churches. Specifically, I consider how—in response to the way in which

their parent communities limited the expression of questions and disbelief—*Novitas* and *Common Table* sought to create a space for discussion, enquiry, and doubt.

Creating a space that allowed for various theological explorations and intellectual discourses to exist in these emerging churches surfaced in my research as key descriptive feature for understanding the characteristic nature of both *Novitas* and *Common Table*. As detailed in the depictions of these emerging churches in chapters four and five, participants placed a pronounced emphasis upon the freedom they experienced in discussing, exploring, and questioning matters of faith and belief in their respective communities. That they found this feature meaningful can also be seen in the vital role that theological conversations, discussions, and dialogues played in these emerging churches.

In attempting to maintain this space for theological questioning and intellectual enquiry, *Novitas* and *Common Table* chose not to establish boundaries of ‘acceptable’ belief that participants had to adhere to in order to belong to the community. Although the depictions of *Common Table* and *Novitas* reveal the presence of tacit parameters, the overall approach these communities took in creating spaces for theological discussion, intellectual enquiry, and spiritual doubt challenges the understanding of church found in the parent tradition of these emerging communities. This is particularly the case when considering the emphasis evangelicalism places on conversion—which involves a confession of belief in order to belong. The rejection of this notion of belonging for these emerging churches raises several ecclesiological questions. Does removing these boundaries of belief not threaten the Christian identity of these communities? Or put another way, with no manifest boundaries, what prevents these communities from drifting into an identity that is no longer Christian? In light of these concerns, a greater question emerges: how can an understanding of church be reconfigured in order to include those with questions and doubt while still maintaining a distinctly Christian identity? The following consideration of these questions in light of the practices of these two emerging communities will help answer the question of what *Novitas* and *Common Table* are contributing to their parent communities’ understanding of church.

Model of Community Formation in Emerging Churches

A significant means for understanding the way in which these communities have maintained their Christian identity despite not having explicit boundaries is through the drawing of distinctions between a ‘bounded-set’ approach to community formation and a ‘centred-set’ approach to community formation. In the opinion of Anabaptist theologian and emerging church researcher Stuart Murray, the centred-set model of community formation has been generally adopted by emerging churches seeking to create an inclusive and welcoming environment. According to Murray, these centred-set churches will possess a definite point of focus around which the community gathers, and they will expend little energy in policing their borders and therefore openly welcome those with doubts and questions.⁷⁸⁰ He argues that centred-set churches possess the following distinct characteristics:

a definite centre, comprising non-negotiable core convictions, rooted in the story which has shaped the community—and ultimately in Jesus Christ. This centre is the focal point, around which members of the community gather enthusiastically. Its core convictions shape the church and separate it from other communities in a plural and contested culture. The church expends its energy on maintaining the core rather than patrolling boundaries. Confidence in its core convictions frees the church to be inclusive, hospitable and open to others, who are welcome to explore the community.⁷⁸¹

He contrasts this model of community formation with the bounded-set model, ‘which has clear boundaries and maintains the integrity of a community by excluding any whose beliefs or behaviour are unacceptable.’⁷⁸² Murray also makes a distinction between a ‘fuzzy-set’ model of community formation and an ‘open-set’ model of community formation—with an open-set model being wildly inclusive, with no central focus and no external boundaries, and a fuzzy-set model being inclusive to a point, but often unclear on where exactly the boundaries lie.⁷⁸³ Similar to Murray’s assessment, Phyllis Tickle has also noted that, ‘by the change of the millennium, emergent Christianity in general had adopted a centre-set approach, though its leaders no longer use that terminology very frequently’.⁷⁸⁴ According to Tickle,

⁷⁸⁰ Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom* (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), p. 29.

⁷⁸¹ Murray, *Church After Christendom*, pp. 29-30.

⁷⁸² Murray, *Church After Christendom*, pp. 26-27.

⁷⁸³ Murray, *Church After Christendom*, pp. 26-31.

⁷⁸⁴ Tickle, *Great Emergence*, pp. 158-159.

instead of speaking of centred-set approaches to community formation, emerging church leaders more frequently speak about the difference between ‘believe-behave-belong’ and ‘belong-behave-believe’ in order to distinguish between bounded-set thinking and centred-set thinking.

Significantly, in suggesting that emerging churches have generally adopted this centred-set approach, Murray disclosed how the participants in these communities do not always acknowledge their indebtedness to the Anabaptist missiologist Paul Hiebert for his work in adapting these models to an ecclesial context. For example Tickle’s abovementioned popular work on the emerging church phenomenon traces the development of centred-set approaches to church back to the teachings of John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard Church Movement.⁷⁸⁵ Thus, when considering the centred-set nature of these emerging communities, I explore in more detail the development and the noteworthy features of these concepts in Hiebert’s own writing.

Centred-Set Logic in the Work of Paul Hiebert

Perplexed by the ambiguous notions of ‘membership’ that he observed in village churches throughout the multi-religious context of India—where ‘the clear lines between Hindu and Christian seemed to blur’—Hiebert’s seminal work sought to explore the possibility of employing a variety of organizational categories for understanding and articulating church involvement.⁷⁸⁶ As a part of this process, he introduced two contrasting approaches to the question of Christian identity and community formation—namely, ‘bounded-set logic’ and ‘centred-set logic’. In Hiebert’s analysis, much of Western culture—including the churches in the West—tended towards a bounded-set approach in establishing organizational categories. Thus, within these cultures, (1) categories are created ‘by listing the essential characteristics that an object must have to be within the set’; (2) ‘the category is defined by a clear boundary’; (3) ‘objects within a bounded set are uniform in their essential characteristics’ and (4) ‘bounded sets are static sets’.⁷⁸⁷

⁷⁸⁵ Tickle, *Great Emergence*, pp. 158-159.

⁷⁸⁶ Paul G. Hiebert, “Sets and Structures: a Study of Church Patterns,” in *New Horizons in World Mission: Evangelicals and the Christian Mission in the 1980s*, ed. David J. Hesselgrave (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 220.

⁷⁸⁷ Hiebert, “Sets and Structures,” pp. 220-221.

In translating this analysis of set logic into an ecclesial context, Hiebert suggested that bounded-set approaches to Christianity and church membership sought to ‘define “Christian” in terms of a set of essential or definitive characteristics’.⁷⁸⁸ These characteristics typically included adherence to specific doctrinal beliefs and/or certain behavioral adaptations. Furthermore, the use of bounded-set logic attempted to make sharp distinctions between individuals who are Christian and individuals who are not through a careful patrolling and maintaining of the established belief and behavioral boundaries. In line with these two features, bounded-set approaches to Christianity and church membership also took the view that all Christians were uniform in their fundamental characteristics and therefore essentially the same. Interestingly, and perhaps ironically, this perspective results in a sharp distinction being drawn between the roles of leaders and the roles of other community participants. According to Hiebert, if all Christians are perceived to be essentially the same, ‘for the leadership role to have credibility, it must be sharply differentiated from the roles of common folk and placed on a higher level’.⁷⁸⁹ Consequently, within bounded-set communities, it is necessary to make clear structural distinctions between those who lead and those who are led. Finally, bounded-set approaches to both Christianity and church communities placed primary focus upon bringing people into these categories, often conceiving of it in terms of a boundary-crossing event such as conversion.

In contrast to using bounded-set logic to determine a particular community’s constituency, Hiebert suggested the possibility of creating categories for inclusion using centred-set logic. In his analysis, centred-sets are created by clearly defining a centre and a thing’s relationship to that centre. In particular, Hiebert is concerned with whether or not a particular object is moving towards the centre or away from the centre. This perspective results in dynamic sets, where ‘no single common uniformity’ exists, and where, so long as the centre remains clear, the boundaries do not need to be maintained.⁷⁹⁰ Because belonging is defined through one’s movement towards the centre as opposed to the crossing of a boundary, the members of the set

⁷⁸⁸ Hiebert, “Sets and Structures,” p. 221.

⁷⁸⁹ Hiebert, “Sets and Structures,” p. 222.

⁷⁹⁰ Hiebert, “Sets and Structures,” p. 223.

remain varied in their essential characteristics—with some members being far from the centre and others being near.⁷⁹¹ The implication of this for leadership is that sharp structural distinctions between leaders and non-leaders are not as necessary in centred-set churches because leadership in these communities is not determined by one's designation, but by one's proximity to the centre.

Novitas and Common Table as Centred-Set Communities

In the case of *Novitas* and *Common Table*, the centred-set model of community formation helps to explain how these communities can maintain their Christian identities without erecting any explicit boundaries. By contrast, the parent communities of these emerging churches, with their emphasis on believing acceptable doctrines and the evangelical emphasis on conversion, can be seen as bounded-set communities. Still, identifying *Novitas* and *Common Table* as centred-set churches raises important questions concerning the exact nature of the focal points in these communities. To be more specific, if centred-set churches gather around a central focus, what was the particular gathering focus in these emerging churches, and is it capable of maintaining the community's Christian identity? For the *Common Table* community, with its dedicated focus upon the celebration of the Eucharist, the answers to these questions are more straightforward. Indeed, throughout the weekly celebration of the sacrament, there is a noticeable intent to centre this emerging church on the shaping story of God's activity in Christ, and this focus will continue to lead the community back into its Christian identity. In this respect, *Common Table* stands as a leading example of the centred-set model for community formation. In fact, Joe's response in chapter five to the question of whether or not a person would be excluded from participating in *Common Table* based upon what they believed captured well the centred-set logic operating in this community:

I mean our sense has always been that if the congregation continues to focus its life around the life, death and resurrection of Christ, that... you know, it's kind of a—I don't want to say a war of attrition—but if you don't believe in those things, it's going to become pretty annoying to hear them spoken about. Do you know what I mean? So, I don't really see that as something where we have to go around policing the

⁷⁹¹ Hiebert, "Sets and Structures," p. 223.

borders, because, you know, hopefully it will be convincing at some point—just like it was for all of us.⁷⁹²

Novitas on the other hand, did not have a particular element of emphasis within their community in the way that *Common Table* did, and therefore determining the focal point around which this community gathered is more difficult. As Barbara's response in chapter four stressed,⁷⁹³ the key themes that the community of *Novitas* dealt with centred upon aspects relating to the Christian faith, and so, at least at a basic level, this emerging church has the principal matters of this faith as its core focus. The candle lighting ceremony that marked off the formal time of their gatherings also served to focus the community around the triune God—and so presumably God's activity in Christ and through the Spirit. Still, because of the intensely questioning nature of the community, without an increased emphasis on clarifying this core, *Novitas* runs the risk of migrating from a community formed by a centred-set model to a community formed by the fuzzy-set or open-set models introduced above. Without a clearly defined centre and no distinct boundaries, *Novitas* would become the radically inclusive community that Stuart Murray referred to as 'open-set'. While this open-set approach would allow them to maintain their inclusivity, it would come at the cost of their Christian identity—as open-set communities, with no clear centre or distinct boundaries, possess little basis for distinction. However, if *Novitas* did wish to maintain both their Christian distinction and their inclusiveness, without clarifying their centre, they would be required to draw upon what Stuart Murray identifies as fuzzy-set logic. In this model, *Novitas* could maintain their Christian distinctiveness through boundaries, but these boundaries would be unclear and moving—which could at various times threaten either their inclusivity or their Christian identity. Thus, in order to maintain both their inclusiveness and their Christian identity through centre-set logic, it will be important for *Novitas* to bring increasing clarity to the focal point around which the community is gathered. Otherwise, the community of *Novitas* may find it difficult to maintain their Christian identity without establishing more explicit boundaries.

⁷⁹² Joe, turn 88.

⁷⁹³ When commenting on the question of what determined the beliefs of *Novitas*, Barbara remarked, 'we are ultimately a Christian community, so there is this sense to have an orthodoxy or an understanding that is rooted in the wider Christian history. So we're not a Buddhist group or a... whatever.' Barbara, turn 137.

Contribution of Centred-Set Logic for Parent Communities

Since the bounded-set logic of the evangelical tradition bases its understanding of what it means to belong to a Christian community largely upon whether or not one gives confessional assent to the community's agreed upon doctrines, those who remain apprehensive or doubtful in matters of their faith will find it difficult to achieve an authentic sense of belonging in these churches. Likewise, individuals who give serious consideration to those thorny theological questions—particularly questions that have within them the potential to threaten the essential doctrines of the community—can also experience similar difficulties in achieving a sense of belonging in bounded-set communities. Thus, regardless of the extent to which those in emerging churches sought to participate in the life of their parent communities, if they possessed unsettling questions and fundamental doubts, they found themselves outside the 'set' due to the fact that they did not meet the essential criteria of belief. Because these participants were outside the set, formally belonging to their parent community is impossible—at least formally belonging with integrity. Indeed, as the narratives of emerging church participants indicate, community members were not forced to leave these bounded-set churches when doubts and questions arose, they were simply discouraged from voicing these doubts and questions. So, even though superficial belonging remained a possibility for the participants, because they were unable to express their doubts and questions authentic belonging eluded them. In short, for emerging church participants to experience full inclusion in their parent communities, which conceived of themselves through bounded set logic, they are required to cross the boundary that divides the realms of doubt and unbelief (or dissenting belief) from the realms of faith and confession. What is more, as hospitable and welcoming as these parent communities hope to be, they will nevertheless be forced to police these boundaries in order to preserve their shared identity, resulting in a marginalisation, penalisation or ultimate exclusion of those on the outside of the boundary markers. Thus, while doubt and questions are able to exist in these bounded-set communities, giving voice to these matters is difficult because it threatens the understanding that belief is an essential criterion for belonging to the set.

Yet, the notion of centred-set logic expressed through the practices of *Novitas* and *Common Table* serves as a threat to the stability and permeability of the traditional

boundary markers of their parent communities. In fact, through creating and maintaining an ecclesial space for enquiry, questions, and doubt, the communities of *Novitas* and *Common Table* have sought to dissolve the boundaries of belief and behaviour that one must cross in order to fully belong. Consequently, much of what these emerging churches are contributing towards their parent tradition's understanding of church centres on this reality. Indeed, these emerging communities, through their centred-set approach to community formation, provide a full sense of belonging for those participants in their midst who possess questions and doubts. Because these communities offer full inclusion to both those who believe and those do not, the voices that express doubt are not perceived as a threat to the community identity, but are rather seen as a necessary contribution. Importantly, this degree of contribution is the primary difference between the inclusion and participation of the 'seeker' in centred-set churches like *Novitas* and *Common Table*, and the inclusion and participation of the 'seeker' in bounded-set churches like their parent communities. Whereas both community formation models can be sensitive to the presence of those who are inquiring into the Christian faith, only the centred-set model of these emerging churches makes allowance for a seeker's belonging regardless of the seeker's assent to a set of beliefs.

This analysis suggests that the understandings of church found in the parent communities of *Novitas* and *Common Table* could benefit from the centred-set lessons of these emerging churches. While the bounded-set parent churches are not likely to achieve the intensely inclusive and unbounded state that has been reached by the communities that have emerged from them, they are nonetheless being invited by *Novitas* and *Common Table* to reconsider the impermeability of some of their boundaries. Specifically, the parent communities can look to the practices that emphasize inclusion and participation in these emerging churches as models for addressing the tensions brought about by the possible presence of those within their own community who seek to belong without believing. By first creating spaces where members are invited to dialogue openly about their own beliefs, followed by a careful consideration of the diversity of belief that might already exist within their own community, the parent communities could recognize concrete instances where their boundaries have been perforated—demonstrating how those with beliefs that diverge from the church's doctrines are perhaps already experiencing meaningful

levels of inclusion in their community. In some cases, these instances of inclusion could result the parent communities redrawing their previously sketched boundaries.⁷⁹⁴ In other cases however, these instances of inclusion might result in the parent churches removing some of their previously established boundaries altogether and shifting toward a centred-set model. In either case, such an exercise would highlight the permeability of their boundaries—whether those are boundaries drawn between church and non-church or boundaries drawn between their tradition and other traditions. Additionally, this process will give the parent tradition the opportunity to reflect on alternative ways of maintaining their communities. For instance, when individuals in bounded-set churches develop considerable doubts in matters of faith and belief, they—due to the nature of the bounded-set—no longer formally belong to the community. Even though it does not follow that one must automatically cease participating in the life of the church, this sense of no longer ‘belonging’ does often result in the individual feeling compelled to withdraw. This has certainly been the case with those in *Novitas* and *Common Table*, who have left this tradition and have landed in emerging churches. But, by drawing upon the centred-set practices of these emerging churches, which have sought to reconfigure the relationship between believing and belonging, the parent communities could consider developing structures in their own churches that create more categories for belonging. Just as a number of churches in the evangelical tradition strive to create structures that allow for a level of participation from those *seekers* who have yet to become Christians, so too could these churches seek to form structures that would give their *members* who develop considerable doubts the space to remain in their communities as they process through these matters. The prominent *Alpha Course*—with its emphasis upon relational experiences and spiritual encounters⁷⁹⁵—is a clear example of how many evangelical congregations have sought to create ecclesial structures for ‘seekers’ who have questions about the Christian faith to participate. Could these same communities develop similar encounters for existing members who are experiencing doubt in regards to the Christian faith? While these encounters are perhaps taking place in an informal manner in these communities, formalizing them through the development of ecclesial structures similar to seeker initiatives such as

⁷⁹⁴ Clearly this exercise could also have a completely different impact, which could result in some members being ‘ejected’ from the community.

⁷⁹⁵ For a sociological analysis of the *Alpha Course* see: Stephen Hunt, *The Alpha Enterprise: Evangelism in a Post-Christian Era* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

the *Alpha Course*, could go a long way in recognizing the persisting doubt and questions present in their communities. By maintaining an ecclesial space where a community member's sense of participation can be preserved in the midst of unbelief, the parent communities of *Novitas* and *Common Table* could ease some of the tensions brought about by those in their churches who desire to belong without believing.

Implication of Centred-Set Logic for *Novitas* and *Common Table*

As explained in chapter two, and as noted above, the practices of these emerging churches have consequences for their own communities' understanding of church. According to the mechanism adapted from Schreiter's local theologies, considering these ecclesiological implications is a residual outcome of the dialogue process (*area 4d*). In this section, I focus particular attention on the ecclesial impact of centred-set logic in the *Novitas* and *Common Table* community. This step in the dialogue process is critical as it provides an indication of what the parent communities can anticipate as they consider adopting a more centred-set model of community formation.

As is the case with other aspects of lived Christianity, a number of complexities arise when the ecclesiological investigation of centred-set logic is not abstracted from the practices of particular faith communities, but rather is dealt with as something deeply embedded within those practices. Indeed, much of the ecclesiological discussion surrounding centred-set and bounded-set approaches to community formation has remained largely theoretical in scope—essentially establishing each approach as an all-encompassing type—and therefore these discussions have been less concerned with exploring the key nuances brought about through concrete particulars.⁷⁹⁶ Thus, when considering centred-set logic as something arising from the actual practices of the communities of *Common Table* and *Novitas*, two particular matters claimed my attention. Both of these matters represent crucial questions arising from the practices of these emerging communities, and they carry within them significant ecclesiological implications. One question deals with the nature and place of

⁷⁹⁶For an example of the typological use of centred-set approaches versus bounded-set approaches, see the table in Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), p. 49.

Christian baptism in centred-set communities like *Novitas* and *Common Table*; the other question brings back into focus a concern raised earlier in the chapter—namely, the establishing and maintaining of the centre in these emerging churches.

Christian Baptism

As noted earlier, the depiction of these two emerging churches in chapters four and five demonstrate how both *Novitas* and *Common Table*—instead of abandoning the practice of baptism as they emerged—chose to maintain the baptismal practices found in their parent communities. This is significant when considering the unbounded nature of these emerging communities. In this section, I first consider how the practice of baptism inherited from their parent communities challenges the unbounded, centred-set understanding of church in these emerging communities. I then suggest a way forward that would allow *Novitas* and *Common Table* to maintain harmony between their centred-set approach to community formation and their practice of baptism.

Although both *Novitas* and *Common Table* emerged from the evangelical wings of the churches, the baptismal practices they inherited from their parent communities arise from distinct traditions. As seen in the depictions of these communities, *Common Table* has inherited a more free church understanding of this practice, whereas *Novitas* has followed an Anglican-Methodist baptismal understanding. Thus, these two emerging communities have inherited various understandings concerning the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of Christian baptism, and they have inherited differing practices relating to the ‘how’ and ‘when’. Because of these dissimilarities, I rely on an ecumenical account of baptism in order to highlight those shared aspects of baptism that the parent communities have in common with one another, and thus, those shared aspects of baptism that these emerging churches have inherited. In producing this ecumenical account of the shared aspects of baptism, I rely upon the important work produced by the World Council of Churches’ Faith and Order Commission on baptism, Eucharist and ministry.⁷⁹⁷

⁷⁹⁷ World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

Due in part to the sharp rise in ecumenical awareness that emerged over the last half of the twentieth century, a growing number of theologians have sought to craft their work in such a way as to bring their denomination's understanding of baptism into conversation with the understanding located in other traditions and denominations—stressing areas of agreement as well as points of difference between their practices and the practices in other wings of the churches.⁷⁹⁸ This has prompted the churches towards a more focused reflection on their teaching and practice of the baptismal rite—with much of this reflection having been brought together in the 1982 Lima statement *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (BEM)*. While recognizing the diversity of interpretation and application that exists across the spectrum of Christian traditions, *BEM* articulated the fundamental presence of certain critical aspects within the meaning of baptism. These aspects included (1) participation in Christ's death and resurrection, (2) conversion, pardoning and cleansing, (3) the gift of the Spirit, (4) incorporation into the Body of Christ and (5) the sign of the kingdom.⁷⁹⁹ Importantly, as Bryan Spinks has argued, these five images of baptism stress the fundamental theological dimensions embedding in this practice.⁸⁰⁰ Indeed, that Christians participate in Christ's death and resurrection in baptism speaks to the Christological dimensions of this ritual; the images of conversion, pardoning and cleansing evoke the soteriological dimensions of baptism; linking baptismal imagery with the gift of the Spirit speaks to the pneumatological dimensions of this ritual; that Christians are incorporated into the Body of Christ through baptism reveals the ecclesiological dimensions present in this imagery; and finally, conceptualizing baptism as a sign of the kingdom points to the eschatological significance of this event. For the purposes of this section, I focus my attention on the ecclesiological dimensions present in this understanding of Christian baptism.

In further articulating how these above images are present in the meaning of baptism, *BEM* stressed the notion that 'through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place'.⁸⁰¹ The

⁷⁹⁸ Bryan D. Spinks, *Reformation and Modern Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From Luther to Contemporary Practices* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 137.

⁷⁹⁹ WCC, *BEM*, pp. 1-2.

⁸⁰⁰ Spinks, *Theologies of Baptism*, p. 161.

⁸⁰¹ WCC, *BEM*, p. 2.

Faith and Order paper goes on to explain that ‘our common baptism, which unites us to Christ in faith, is thus a basic bond of unity.’⁸⁰² Elsewhere, the Commission reminds churches of the importance of explaining these concepts during baptismal services. In so doing, they once again draw out the aspects present in the meaning of baptism:

It is appropriate to explain in the context of the baptismal service the meaning of baptism as it appears from scriptures (i.e. the participation in Christ’s death and resurrection, conversion, pardoning and cleansing, gift of the Spirit, incorporation into the body of Christ and sign of the Kingdom).⁸⁰³

Consistent in all of these articulations of the meaning of baptism is the notion that this ritual—in part—represents a boundary marker whereby one, through participation in this act, is incorporated into Christ and into the Christian community.

Significantly, the depiction of *Novitas* and *Common Table* in chapters four and five reveals an articulation of baptism that is consistent with their parent communities, and consistent with the boundary marking understanding found in *BEM*. This was seen in the discussion of baptism, where Dave (*Novitas*) affirmed that ‘for us, [baptism] was a formal entrance into the sponsoring churches—so the Anglican Church and the Methodist Church’.⁸⁰⁴ The boundary crossing nature of ritual was also seen in Joe’s vivid description of this practice in *Common Table*:

The way that we've done it in the past is try to use as much water as possible because... so people could see the chaotic nature of what is taking place in baptism—the true kind of entering into the chaotic waters that were covering the surface of the earth before the creation of the world. So entering into the chaos of nothingness and death, so that one can be raised to new life and world—the real, true, recreated world of life in Christ.⁸⁰⁵

Again, statements like this resonate with an interpretation that holds baptism up as a boundary marker, and they appear to threaten the centred-set approach adopted by these emerging churches. Yet, as seen in chapters four and five, both Dave (*Novitas*)

⁸⁰² WCC, *BEM*, p. 2.

⁸⁰³ WCC, *BEM*, p. 6.

⁸⁰⁴ Dave, turn 30.

⁸⁰⁵ Joe, turn 54.

and Mike (*Common Table*) stressed how participants were not being baptized into their local communities, but into the wider Christian community. This was a critical distinction that helps preserve a certain degree of centred-set logic when considering the local makeup of these emerging churches, while at the same time, allowing for interpretations of baptismal practices that retain those boundary-marking elements. Still, the fact that these emerging churches chose not to abandon or significantly reinterpret this practice in order to bring it in line with their more unbounded understandings of belonging highlights a critical point of tension that existed in these communities and needs further attention.

Returning once again to the on-going ecumenical considerations surrounding the nature of Christian baptism, I conclude this section by offering a possible way forward for those emerging churches like *Common Table* and *Novitas*, who wish to draw upon centred-set logic in forming their communities while still preserving the important theological meanings present in the baptismal ritual. As noted in a World Council of Churches document published subsequent to *BEM*, many churches have responded to the challenge of overcoming their continuing divisions by ‘stressing baptism as the bond of their unity in Christ’.⁸⁰⁶ In their attempts to strengthen this unity through the recognition of one another’s baptisms, these churches ‘are now emphasizing that baptism is baptism into Christ, not into this or that historic denomination. In baptism one becomes not a Methodist, Lutheran or Roman Catholic, but a Christian.’⁸⁰⁷ While *Novitas* and *Common Table* remained unequivocal in their claims that individuals were not being baptized into their local communities, there was not the same level of agreement in stressing that an individual is being baptised into Christ. By giving more emphasis to this Christological aspect of baptism, these churches could see Christian baptism as a means whereby an individual aligns oneself with Christ, and therefore also aligns oneself with the centre of the community. While an understanding such as this fits well with both the centred-set logic of these emerging churches and with the current ecumenical articulations of baptism, it places a deep importance on establishing and

⁸⁰⁶ Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller, “Introduction,” in *Becoming a Christian: the Ecumenical Implications of Our Common Baptism*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), p. 3.

⁸⁰⁷ Best and Heller, “Introduction,” p. 3.

maintaining Christ as the centre around which their communities gather. I now turn my attention towards exploring some of the challenge *Novitas* and *Common Table* face in doing this.

Establishing and Maintaining the Centre

Those advocating for the adoption of centred-set logic in the formation of Christian communities regularly insist that the centre around which these churches gather be the Christian story of God acting in Christ. This ultimately centres the community on the person of Jesus Christ himself.⁸⁰⁸ In the above section I argued that the communities of *Common Table* and *Novitas* had indeed both configured themselves around this centre, although they did so with varying degrees of clarity. Still, when attempting to grapple with the concrete realities of these communities, as depicted in chapters four and five, significant questions surrounding the viability of the centred-set model of community formation begin to arise. Specifically, what does it mean for *Novitas* and *Common Table* to be centred on the story of God acting in Christ when there was not a fixed understanding of several pertinent aspects of this narrative in these communities?

This dilemma can be illustrated by the vacillating interpretations of Christ's resurrection that existed in the communities of both *Novitas* and *Common Table*. As seen in the depiction of these communities in chapters four and five, community participants did not share a common understanding of this aspect in the story of God acting in Christ. In considering this dilemma, my aim is not to argue for the importance of one understanding of Christ's resurrection over another, but rather it is to demonstrate the complexities that exist as a result of *Novitas* and *Common Table* community members holding conflicting beliefs about the nature of their centres.

The countless number of ways in which 'the story of God acting in Christ' has been (and could be) interpreted means that churches adopting centred-set logic need to qualify, at least to some degree, their understanding of this narrative. Failure to do

⁸⁰⁸ See for example Frost and Hirsch's work on centred-set communities, where they suggest, 'Since at the core of the centred set is Christ, a church should be concerned with fostering increasing closeness to Jesus in the lives of all those involved'. Frost and Hirsch, *Things to Come*, p. 48. See also: Murray, *Church After Christendom*, pp. 29-30.

so will leave these churches without a decipherable centre, threatening their distinct identities and undermining any attempts an individual might make to belong. Indeed, if belonging in centred-set communities is determined by one's relationship to the centre, then having a commonly established centre that differentiates one particular community from other potential communities is essential. Yet, in setting forth these qualifications, centred-set communities could run the risk of morphing into another form of set-logic that is much closer to bounded-set thinking than centred-set thinking—leading to a model where one's belonging is contingent upon an adherence to a set of doctrinal specifications meant to define the centre around which that individual seeks to relate. In fact, given the interrelated nature of Christian doctrines, it is not difficult to imagine how a centred-set community's attempts to qualify 'the story of God acting in Christ' could quickly lead to a robust series of confessional statements. One of the temptations then for these centred-set communities would be to patrol this ever expanding centre in the same manner that the parameters are patrolled in bounded-set communities. The communities adopting this approach could actually become a bounded-set community masquerading as a centred-set community, albeit with fewer borders to patrol.

As evidenced in chapters four and five and discussed above, both *Novitas* and *Common Table* opted for fewer, rather than more qualifications surrounding the nature of their centres. In fact, these emerging churches altogether resisted the use of doctrinal criteria for the establishing their centres. Thus, the likelihood that they will develop approaches to maintaining their centres that bring them more in line with bounded-set models of community formation is small. Instead, the challenge for these two emerging communities will be establishing and articulating the nature of their central focus in a precise enough manner as to not threaten their Christian identities or undermine any individual's attempt to belong.

Hybridity and Centred-Set Logic

Importantly, the understandings of church that develop out of this discussion of centred-set logic find strong parallel with the key themes arising from my above discussion on hybridity. Indeed, as seen in the above section entitled 'Hybridity Applied', one of the crucial ways postcolonial theorists have employed hybridity is as a concept that challenges and ultimately erodes the boundaries that attempt to

mark off one particular identity from another. By stressing the indistinctness that results from pervasive occurrences of mixing and blending, these theorists employ the notion of hybridity in order to challenge modern attempts to understand one's identity through mutually exclusive categories such as black or white, civilized or primitive, rich or poor, whole or disabled, native or alien, Christian or pagan, etc. In a similar manner, centred-set communities also seek to challenge certain binary concepts. They do this by calling into question the bounded-set approach to community formation and any sharp distinctions between individuals who are inside the set and individuals who are not through a diligent patrolling of the community's boundaries. In this respect, both centred-set logic and hybridity represent boundary-defying concepts capable of calling into question the fixity of the border between those who are in and those who are out. Being mindful of this parallel is crucial in locating the contributions that emerging churches are making to their parent communities' understanding of church. *Novitas* and *Common Table* reveal the way in which church can be understood as a space of ecclesial borrowing and blending. The curiosity and experimentation that was present in these communities resulted in a wide range of appropriation and borrowing in their liturgical gatherings. Yet, it was the spaces they carved out for theological questioning and intellectual enquiry that ultimately made those appropriations and borrowings permissible. Keeping this fact at the fore will be important for the parent communities to remember as they consider developing hospitable climates for hybrid exchanges. An understanding of church as a space for ecclesial borrowing and blending is deeply dependent on an understanding of church as a space for discussion, enquiry, and doubt.

Conclusion

This thesis represents the fruit of an empirical exploration of two communities situated within the wider emerging church phenomenon. The aim of this research was to identify the contributions they make to their parent communities' understanding of what it is to be church. In the below paragraphs I narrate the ways in which this thesis accomplished these aims—giving particular attention to how the research question has been answered and the contribution this makes to knowledge in the field.

My interest in emerging church was awakened by the polarizing rhetoric surrounding early expressions of this phenomenon. With proponents suggesting emerging church represented the future of Christianity in the West, and detractors—particularly those within evangelicalism—cautioning against the threats they believed to be present in this phenomenon, developing a better understanding of these communities became a critical concern. In surveying the literature on emerging church, several gaps in the research surfaced. First, a more measured evaluation of emerging church was needed—one that avoided the more extreme positions put forward by proponents and detractors. For this reason, I elected to investigate what it was that existing churches could learn from emerging communities. Positioning the research in this manner allowed me to avoid the more extreme portrayals of emerging church present in earlier writings by seeking to identify the constructive aspects of emerging communities without exaggerating or trivializing the import of emerging church. Moreover, in further concentrating the research around those Christian communities most closely related to emerging churches, I developed a unique research question, focusing on the contributions that emerging churches could make to the evangelical communities from which they emerged. The approach I took in answering this question addressed a second gap in the literature on emerging church. Because much of the research on emerging church neglected concrete expressions of actual emerging communities, early assessments of these communities were built more on speculation than on concrete realities. Indeed, even much of the more empirically based research on emerging church focused more on the writings and teachings of emerging church leaders, as opposed to the routine life of those participating in emerging communities. Thus an empirically based study of actual emerging

communities—qualitatively researching the contributions they make to their parent communities’ understanding of what it is to be church—was needed in order to close these gaps. As examined in chapter two, a select number of doctoral studies did focus on actual emerging communities. Still, unlike the approach taken in this thesis, most of these studies did not treat the qualitative data generated through the research as theological material. While the research conducted by Steve Taylor did indeed treat qualitative data as ‘value-laden and thus an expression of theology’,⁸⁰⁹ his research focused on one emerging community in New Zealand, while this current research focuses on two emerging communities in the United Kingdom and the United States. Accordingly, the research conducted in this thesis offers an important contribution to the existing knowledge on emerging churches.

In pursuing the question of what contributions these emerging churches could make to their parent communities’ understanding of what it is to be church, I brought the ecclesiological data generated through this qualitative research into a conversation with the parent communities. Through this ecclesiological dialogue I showed how participants in these emerging communities left their parent tradition due to the rigid, narrow, limited, or insular ways of approaching Christian practice, doctrine, and belief in their parent communities. I then showed how participants, in response to these experiences, sought a more diverse approach to church—borrowing widely from a number of distinct ecclesial traditions. I also showed how participants sought to create a space for inclusion and diversity of belief in their emerging communities—where one could ask questions and explore faith in the midst of doubt. I argued that participants found both of these distinctions meaningful in their experience of emerging church. Yet, the borrowing, blending, questioning, and exploring in these emerging communities raised questions about the nature of church—particularly for their parent communities—and thus invited renewed reflection on fresh ways for understanding what it means to be church.

Through this analysis, two alternative ways of understanding church developed out of the ecclesial life and practices of these emerging communities. The first is an

⁸⁰⁹ Steve Taylor, “A New Way of Being Church: Approach to Cityside Baptist Church as Christian Faith ‘Making Do’ in a Postmodern World” (PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2004), p 19.

understanding of church as a space for ecclesial borrowing and blending. The second is an understanding of church as a space for discussion, enquiry, and doubt. This thesis argued that these two emerging understandings of church have implications for the way in which the parent communities conceive of themselves and their membership, and therefore could necessitate a reformulation of the nature of ecclesial identity and belonging in this tradition. Specifically, this research revealed how these emerging churches, through their practice of borrowing and blending from diverse ecclesial traditions, reshape notions of ecclesial identity. In contrast to the more insular understanding of ecclesial identity found in their parent communities—which conceives of the evangelical tradition as firmly bounded and existing in a pure or unmixed state—these emerging communities recognized (and celebrated) the prominent role that ecclesial exchange and overlap had in the formation of their ecclesial identity. By employing the notion of hybridity to analyse this feature of emerging church practice, this thesis argued that all ecclesial identities—including the evangelical identity of their parent communities—emerged through relational encounters between two or more distinct traditions or ecclesial communities. Thus, the hybrid understanding of ecclesial identity present in these emerging communities offers their parent communities a more authentic understanding of what it means to be church. Furthermore, the research also revealed how these emerging churches, through their intellectual exploration and theological questioning, reshape notions of belonging for their parent communities. Again, in contrast to the more bounded understanding of belonging found in their parent tradition—which bases belonging to a Christian community largely upon whether or not one gives confessional assent to the community’s agreed upon doctrines—these emerging churches welcomed theological questions and intellectual exploration, and did not establish confessional or doctrinal criteria for inclusion. By employing the notion of centred-set logic to analyse this feature of emerging church practice, this thesis revealed how emerging churches were able to maintain their Christian identity without the formulation of exclusionary boundaries such as doctrine or belief. Through this centred-set approach these emerging communities are offering their parent communities an alternative way of understanding church—one that allows for inclusion and belonging, without the patrolling or policing of doctrinal and confessional boundaries. Thus, as argued in this thesis, the notions of hybridity and centred-set logic that emerge out of the life and practice of *Novitas* and *Common Table* provide a rich contribution to their parent communities’

understanding of church. Still, this current thesis has not the scope to map out all the ecclesiological contributions emerging churches make. As such, areas for further research can be recommended. This study focused on two particular emerging communities, each with their own unique communal life and practice. Continuing ethnographic research in different emerging communities would not only provide a richer portrayal of the emerging church phenomenon, but could also reveal additional ecclesiological contributions being made by these communities. Furthermore, this study focused on the contribution these two emerging churches made to their parent communities' understanding of church. Yet, their contribution need not be limited to the parent communities. While it was beyond the scope of this thesis to consider the impact these emerging churches might have on Christian communities in other traditions, the ecclesiological data generated through the study of the life and practice of these two churches offers a dialogue partner for other researchers who may be considering the question of what it means to be church in different traditions.

Appendix A: Ethics Assessment

SCHOOL OF DIVINITY ETHICS IN RESEARCH COMMITTEE ETHICS (SELF) ASSESSMENT FORM: LEVEL ONE

Level One Ethics (Self) assessment is normally to be carried out by the Principal Investigator. For Honours and taught Masters students this is done by the dissertation supervisor on behalf of the programme manager. For MTh/MSc by research and PhD students the assessment is carried out by the first supervisor. For Post-doctoral Fellows this is done in collaboration with the mentor who is responsible for confirming that it has been carried out.

Title of Project:

Funding Body (if applicable):

Principal Invest./ Supervisor/ Prog. Manager name:

Student name and matriculation Number:

Type of student:	PhD	Masters by Research
	Taught Masters	Honours

Protection of research subject confidentiality

Are there any issues of confidentiality which are not adequately handled by the normal tenets of ethical academic research?

NO **YES**

If yes, Level Two Ethics review required

These include mutually understood agreements about:

- Non attribution of individual responses
- Individuals and organisations being anonymised in publications and presentations, if requested
- Feedback to collaborators, rights to edit responses, and intellectual property rights and publication

Data protection and Consent

Are issues of data handling and consent dealt with adequately and following procedures?

NO **YES**

If No, Level Two Ethics review required

For example:

- Will respondents consent be sought regarding the collection of personal data?
- Are there special issues about informed consent or confidentiality in this case?
- Is the research compliant with UOE procedures (www.recordsmanagement.ed.ac.uk)

Moral Issues and Researcher/Institutional Conflicts of Interest

Do any special moral issues/conflicts of interest arise?

NO

YES

If yes, Level Two Ethics review required

For example:

- Might the researcher compromise the research objectivity or independence in return for financial or non-financial benefit for her/himself or for a relative or friend?
- Are there particular moral issues or concerns that may arise, for example where the purposes of the research are concealed, where respondents are unable to provide informed consent or where research findings impinge negatively or differentially upon the interests of participants?
- Does the research involve vulnerable persons such as children, institutionalised persons or others entitled to protection and special procedures to protect their interests?

Potential physical or psychological harm, discomfort, or stress

Is there significant foreseeable potential for psychological harm or stress for those involved in your research?

YES

NO

Is there significant foreseeable potential for physical harm or stress for those involved in your research?

YES

NO

Is there significant foreseeable risk to the researcher?

YES

NO

If YES to any section, Level Two Ethics Review required

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

SELF AUDIT HAS BEEN CONDUCTED?

YES

NO

Were any risks identified?

YES

NO

Is Level Two Ethics Assessment required?

YES

NO

Signature of Applicant:

Date:

Principal Investigator or Scrutineer (supervisor, programme manager, mentor) either:

1. emails research office (K.McLean@ed.ac.uk) following text: " I confirm that I have carried out the School Level One Ethics (Self) Assessment in relation to the proposed research project [insert project name, student name if applicable, and Funding Body if applicable] and that no reasonably foreseeable ethical risks have been identified."

OR

2. Completes a Level Two Ethics Assessment form and submits it to the Ethics In Research Committee via the research office (K.McLean@ed.ac.uk) for a decision.

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Consent Form for interview data to be used for research

Project Title: *Emerging Contributions to Ecclesiology*

Researcher Details: Todd Stockdale t.stockdale@sms.ed.ac.uk 07772546751

This interview is being conducted as a part of a research project for the submission of a PhD thesis at the University of Edinburgh. The aim of this research is to investigate how emerging churches, through their unique blend of ecclesiological understanding and praxis, serve as an aid to the wider Christian community as it reflects upon what it means to be church.

- I agree to take part in the above research project. I have had the project explained to me, and I understand that agreeing to take part means that I am willing to:
 - be interviewed by the researcher
 - allow the interview to be audio recorded and transcribed
 - make myself available for a further interview should that be required
- I understand that my name and identifying details will be changed and access to the original recordings and transcripts will be restricted to the researcher, supervisor and, if requested, the thesis examiners.
- I understand that all interview data will be held in a password protected file and in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act. All interview data, including audio files and transcripts, will be appropriately destroyed within five years of the successful completion of the project.
- I understand that I will be given a transcript of the data concerning me for my approval before it is included in the write up of the research.
- I understand that the data may be included in an unpublished thesis submitted for a PhD, and later lodged in the university library. It may also be used in published works, such as academic journal articles or scholarly texts. I understand that neither my name nor any other personal details that would identify me will be associated with this data.

- I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the interview, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix C: Questions Guiding Participant Observation

Participant Observation
Community Boundaries and Constituency
How does one become a part of the community (or what does it mean to be a part of the community)?
Is there a high threshold or a low threshold for entry and participation. Are they conscious of this? Are they consistent with this?
Where are the community boundaries? (in /out) Who establishes and enforces these boundaries?
Who constitutes this community? What are the commonalities? What are the distinctive characteristics? What about number of people; their race, gender, appearances, dress, occupation, mood?
Community Practices and Rituals
What does participation in an emerging church consist of?
What are their corporate rituals? Norms?
What is their liturgy? Trace the origins of these elements. Where and when do other distinct traditions blend?
How and why does this community engage with the wider community? How and why does this community engage with the wider Church? How and why does this community engage in the wider emerging church conversation?
What about occasional offices? How and why are they incorporated into the life of the community?
What are the repeated events? What are the repeated elements present in most events?

What are the communication channels? How is this community 'connected'? When and where do interactions take place? Verbal and nonverbal communication?
What is done in this community that surprises or runs counter to my expectations?
What about the physical environment: tastes, smells, colors, equipment, mood, and sounds.
Community Values and Assumptions
What are the "taken for granted assumptions" of the community (specifically assumptions of an ecclesiological nature)?
How are community finances collected? Administered?
What sorts of actions, interactions, and events that catch the attention of those participating in this community? What do they stop and watch? What do they talk about frequently? What produces strong emotional responses for them?
Reflexivity
Where do I fit? What are my assumptions? Prejudices? Past experiences? Situating myself amongst all of the above.
What was my response? Emotionally? Physically? Spiritually? Intellectually?
In what ways have I contributed, detracted, or been ambivalent about the above?

Appendix D: Field Note Template

Field Notes: [*date*]

Head notes / Jottings

Spontaneous Writing / Recapping Day

Vivid Details

Event / Encounter	<i>Title of the Event or Encounter</i>
Stated Purpose of Event	<i>What was the stated purpose of the event?</i>
Observed Details	<i>Describe aesthetics and activities; both large and small details.</i>
Conversations	<i>Conversations I had or heard.</i>
Ecclesiological Sense-Making	<i>Bringing the event into dialogue with ecclesiology.</i>
Further Questions	<i>What strikes me as odd, random, surprising, or in need of continued reflection and investigation?</i>
Reflexivity: Situating Myself	<i>Journal of my thoughts and emotions.</i>

Appendix E: *Novitas* Participant Interview Schedule

Q.1 Biographical Information

Name	
Age	
Gender	
Time at <i>Novitas</i>	
Role in <i>Novitas</i>	

Q.2 Current involvement with *Novitas* – What does it mean to belong?

Q.2.a How would you describe your current involvement in *Novitas*? What are some of the reasons that you are a part of this community?

Q.2.b Do you consider *Novitas* to be your church?

Q.2.b.i What does it mean for you to call it your church?

Q.2.b.ii If it's not your church, why do you spend time with this community?

Q.2.c Do you feel like you have any formal (or informal) commitments to this community?

Q.3 Past involvement with Church – What does it mean to emerge?

Q.3.a What has been your previous involvement in or exposure to church?

Q.3.b What were the reasons for your emergence from previous exposures of church to become a part of *Novitas*?

Q.3.b.i How did you discover *Novitas* and become a part of this community?

Q.3.b.ii Are you still involved in any other expressions of church? If so why?

Q.4 Contemplating *Novitas* – What does this church value?

Q.4.a When you think about *Novitas* as a whole, what do you think this community values?

Q.4.b How would you describe *Novitas* to others?

Q.4.b.i Others who belong to a different church?

Q.4.b.ii Others who do not belong to a church?

Q.4.c What, if anything, is missing in your experience with *Novitas*?

Q.4.d What past story or event best captures the spirit of *Novitas*?

Q.4.e How have you seen *Novitas* change throughout your time here?

Q.5 Practices of Novitas – What does this church do?

Q.5.a What does a ‘typical’ month of involvement look like for you?

Q.5.a.i What sorts of things does this community do when they gather on Wednesday nights?

Q.5.a.ii What is your involvement with the community outside of formal gatherings?

Q.5.b Why are you involved in the various things that you are involved with at *Novitas*?

Q.5.c What is the most significant practice of the *Novitas* community for you?

Q.5.c.i What practices in the more institutional/traditional ways of being church are avoided in *Novitas*? Can you tell me why?

Q.5.c.ii Are there any rituals that you wish were done at *Novitas* which are not?

Q.6 Beliefs of Novitas – What does this church confess?

Q.6.a Are there any beliefs that you hold which you consider to be sacred or undeniable?

Q.6.b What are the reasons for you holding the beliefs that you do?

Q.6.c Who or what determines the beliefs of the *Novitas* community?

Q.6.c.i Do you know of anything that must be believed in order to be a part of *Novitas*?

Q.6.c.ii If anything must be believed, do you agree with those beliefs?

Q.6.c.iii Are there any beliefs that you know of which would not be allowed in the community?

Q.6.c.iv Do you think that anyone would ever be excluded from participating based upon what they believe?

Q.7 Mission of Novitas – What does it mean to be missional?

Q.7.a The word ‘missional’ is used quite a bit at the *Novitas* gatherings. What does that word mean to you? What do you think it means to *Novitas*?

Q.7.b How would you describe your present involvement in *Fulcrum Café*?

Q.7.b.i Do you consider it a church?

Q.7.b.ii What does it mean for you to call it a church?

- Q.7.b.iii What do you think the mission of *Fulcrum Café* is?
- Q.7.c What do you believe to be *Novitas*' relationship to *Fulcrum Café*?
- Q.7.c.i What do you believe to be *Fulcrum Café*'s relationship to the city centre?
- Q.7.c.ii What do you believe to be *Novitas*' relationship to the city centre?

Q.8 *Novitas and the Future – What are the aspirations of this church?*

- Q.8.a What are your hopes for the future of *Novitas*?
- Q.8.b Do you have any fears about what it could become?
- Q.8.c Are there any factors that would ever lead you to leave *Novitas*?

Q.9 *Contributions of Novitas – What is this church contributing?*

- Q.9.a What would you like for the wider Church to learn from your community?
- Q.9.a.i What unique contributions do you see *Novitas* making to the Church universal?
- Q.9.a.ii What do you feel like is your own personal contribution to *Novitas*?
- Q.9.b Is there anything about *Novitas* that you would like me to know about that I have not asked?

Appendix F: *Novitas* Leader Interview Schedule

Q.1 Biographical Information

Name	
Age	
Gender	
Time at <i>Novitas</i>	
Role in <i>Novitas</i>	

Q.2 Current involvement with *Novitas* – What does it mean to belong?

Q.2.a What is your present role in *Novitas*? What are some of the reasons you have chosen to be a leader of this community?

Q.2.b Do you consider *Novitas* to be your church?

Q.2.b.i What does it mean for you to call it your church?

Q.2.b.ii If it's not your church, why do you spend time with this community?

Q.2.c Are there any conditions of entrance into *Novitas* and if so who has the power to admit membership or exclude membership?

Q.3 Past involvement with Church – What does it mean to emerge?

Q.3.a What has been your previous involvement in or exposure to church?

Q.3.a.i What were the reasons for your emergence from previous exposures of church to become a leader of *Novitas*?

Q.3.a.ii Are you still involved in any other expressions of church? If so why?

Q.3.b What does it mean to refer to *Novitas* an emerging church?

Q.3.b.i How do you see *Novitas* relating to other emerging churches?

Q.3.b.ii Does *Novitas* maintain any continuity with the wider Church of Christ? If so, how?

Q.4 Contemplating *Novitas* – What does this church value?

Q.4.a When you think about *Novitas* as a whole, what do you think this community values?

Q.4.b What, if anything, is missing within the community of *Novitas*?

- Q.4.c* What past story or event best captures the spirit of *Novitas* for you?
- Q.4.d* What do you think *Novitas* means to most of the people who participate? Why do you think they belong?
- Q.4.e* How have you seen *Novitas* change throughout your time here?
- Q.4.f* Various traditions have particular ways in which they perceive of the Church's relationship to Christ (i.e. incarnation; voluntary society carrying forward the work of Christ; community lead by Christ, etc.). Does *Novitas* have a particular theological or ecclesiological conception of the church's relationship to Christ that it emphasizes?

Q.5 Practices of Novitas – What does this church do?

- Q.5.a* What does a 'typical' month of leadership at *Novitas* look like for you?
- Q.5.a.i* What do you think is the most important thing you do as a leader of *Novitas*?
- Q.5.a.ii* What is your involvement with the community outside of formal gatherings?
- Q.5.b* Why are you involved in the various things that you are involved with at *Novitas*?
- Q.5.c* What is the most significant practice of the *Novitas* community for you?
- Q.5.c.i* What practices in the more institutional/traditional ways of being church are avoided in *Novitas*? Can you tell me why?
- Q.5.c.ii* Are there any rituals that you wish were done at *Novitas* which are not?

Q.6 Beliefs of Novitas – What does this church confess?

- Q.6.a* Are there any beliefs that you hold which you consider to be sacred or undeniable?
- Q.6.b* What are the reasons for you holding the beliefs that you do?
- Q.6.c* Who or what determines the beliefs of the *Novitas* community?
- Q.6.c.i* Is there anything that must be believed to be a part of *Novitas*?
- Q.6.c.ii* If anything must be believed, do you agree with those beliefs?
- Q.6.c.iii* Are there any beliefs which would not be allowed in the community?

Q.6.c.i v Would anyone be excluded from participating based upon what they believe?

Q.7 Mission of Novitas – What does it mean to be missional?

Q.7. a The word ‘missional’ is used quite a bit at the *Novitas* gatherings. What does that word mean to you? What do you think it means to *Novitas*?

Q.7.a.i What does *Novitas* consider to be most essential in the message and mission of the Church?

Q.7.a.ii How does *Novitas* envision its relationship to the world? To the state? To the kingdom of God?

Q.7.b How would you describe your present involvement in *Fulcrum Café*?

Q.7.b.i Do you consider it a church?

Q.7.b.i What does it mean for you to call it a church?

Q.7.b.iii What is the mission of *Fulcrum Café*?

Q.7.c What is *Novitas*’ relationship to *Fulcrum Café*?

Q.7.c.i How do you see *Fulcrum Café* relating to the city centre?

Q.7.c.ii How do you see *Novitas* relating to the city centre?

Q.8 Novitas and the Future – What are the aspirations of this church?

Q.8.a What are your hopes for the future of *Novitas*?

Q.8.b Do you have any fears about what it could become?

Q.9 Contributions of Novitas – What is this church contributing?

Q.9.a What would you like for the wider Church to learn from your community?

Q.9.a.i What unique contributions do you see *Novitas* making to the Church universal?

Q.9.a.ii What do you feel like is your own personal contribution to *Novitas*?

Q.9.b Is there anything about *Novitas* that you would like me to know about that I have not asked?

Appendix G: *Common Table* Participant Interview Schedule

Q.1 Biographical Information

Name	
Age	
Gender	
Time at <i>Common Table</i>	
Role in <i>Common Table</i>	

Q.2 Current involvement with *Common Table* – What does it mean to belong?

Q.2.a How would you describe your current involvement *Common Table*?

Q.2.b Do you consider *Common Table* to be your church?

Q.2.b.i What does it mean for you to call it your church?

Q.2.b.ii If it's not your church, why do you spend time with this community?

Q.2.c Have you made any formal (or informal) commitments to this community?

Q.3 Past involvement with Church – What does it mean to emerge?

Q.3.a What has been your previous involvement in or exposure to church?

Q.3.b What were the reasons for your emergence from previous exposures of church to become a part of *Common Table*?

Q.3.c Are you still involved in any other expressions of church? If so why?

Q.4 Contemplating *Common Table* – What does this church value?

Q.4.a When you think about *Common Table* as a whole, what do you think this community values?

Q.4.b How would you describe *Common Table* to others?

Q.4.b.i Others who belong to a different church?

Q.4.b.ii Others who do not belong to a church?

Q.4.c What, if anything, is missing in your experience with *Common Table*?

Q.4.d How have you seen *Common Table* change throughout your time here?

Q.5 Practices of Common Table – What does this church do?

- Q.5.a What does a ‘typical’ month of involvement look like for you?
- Q.5.b What sorts of things does this community do when they gather on Sunday nights?
- Q.5.c What is the most significant practice of the *Common Table* community for you?
- Q.5.c.i What practices in the more institutional/traditional ways of being church are avoided in *Common Table*? Can you tell me why?
- Q.5.c.ii Are there any rituals that you wish were done at *Common Table* which are not?

Q.6 Beliefs of Common Table – What does this church confess?

- Q.6.a Are there any beliefs that you hold which you consider to be sacred or undeniable?
- Q.6.b What are the reasons for you holding the beliefs that you do?
- Q.6.c Who or what determines the beliefs of the *Common Table* community?
- Q.6.c.i Do you know of anything that must be believed in order to be a part of *Common Table*?
- Q.6.c.ii If anything must be believed, do you agree with those beliefs?
- Q.6.c.iii Do you think that anyone would ever be excluded from participating based upon what they believe?

Q.7 Mission of Common Table – What does it mean to be missional?

- Q.7.a The word ‘missional’ is used quite a bit at the *Common Table* gatherings. What does that word mean to you? What do you think it means to *Common Table*?
- Q.7.b How would you describe your present involvement in the Springfield community?
- Q.7.c What do you believe to be *Common Table*’s relationship to the Springfield community?

Q.8 Common Table and the Future – What are the aspirations of this church?

- Q.8.a What are your hopes for the future of *Common Table*?
- Q.8.b Do you have any fears about what it could become?
- Q.8.c Are there any factors that would ever lead you to leave *Common Table*?

Q.9 Contributions of Common Table – *What is this church contributing?*

Q.9.a What would you like for the wider Church to learn from your community?

Q.9.b Is there anything about *Common Table* that you would like me to know about that I have not asked?

Appendix H: *Common Table* Leader Interview Schedule

Q.1 Biographical Information

Name	
Age	
Gender	
Time at <i>Common Table</i>	
Role in <i>Common Table</i>	

Q.2 Current involvement with *Common Table* – What does it mean to belong?

Q.2.a What does it mean for you to be a leader of this community?

Q.2.b Do you consider *Common Table* to be your church?

Q.2.b.i What does it mean for you to call it your church?

Q.2.b.ii If it's not your church, why do you spend time with this community?

Q.2.c Are there any conditions of entrance into *Common Table* and if so who has the power to admit membership or exclude membership?

Q.3 Past involvement with Church – What does it mean to emerge?

Q.3.a What has been your previous involvement in or exposure to church?

Q.3.a.i What were the reasons for your emergence from previous exposures of church to become a leader of *Common Table*?

Q.3.a.ii Are you still involved in any other expressions of church? If so why?

Q.3.b What does it mean to refer to *Common Table* an emerging church?

Q.3.b.i How do you see *Common Table* relating to other emerging churches?

Q.3.b.ii Does *Common Table* maintain any continuity with the wider Church of Christ? If so, how?

Q.4 Contemplating *Common Table* – What does this church value?

Q.4.a When you think about *Common Table* as a whole, what do you think this community values?

- Q.4.b* What, if anything, is missing within the community of *Common Table*?
- Q.4.c* How have you seen *Common Table* change throughout your time here?
- Q.4.d* Various traditions have particular ways in which they perceive of the Church's relationship to Christ (i.e. incarnation; voluntary society carrying forward the work of Christ; community lead by Christ, etc.). Does *Common Table* have a particular theological or ecclesiological conception of the church's relationship to Christ that it emphasizes?

Q.5 Practices of Common Table – What does this church do?

- Q.5.a* What does a 'typical' month of leadership at *Common Table* look like for you?
- Q.5.b* What do you think is the most important thing you do as a leader of *Common Table*?
- Q.5.c* What is the most significant practice of the *Common Table* community for you?
- Q.5.c.i* What practices in the more institutional/traditional ways of being church are avoided in *Common Table*? Can you tell me why?
- Q.5.c.ii* Are there any rituals that you wish were done at *Common Table* which are not?

Q.6 Beliefs of Common Table – What does this church confess?

- Q.6.a* Are there any beliefs that you hold which you consider to be sacred or undeniable?
- Q.6.b* What are the reasons for you holding the beliefs that you do?
- Q.6.c* Who or what determines the beliefs of the *Common Table* community?
- Q.6.c.i* Is there anything that must be believed to be a part of *Common Table*?
- Q.6.c.ii* If anything must be believed, do you agree with those beliefs?
- Q.6.c.iii* Would anyone be excluded from participating based upon what they believe?

Q.7 Mission of Common Table – What does it mean to be missional?

- Q.7. a* The word 'missional' is used quite a bit at the *Common Table* gatherings. What does that word mean to you? What do you think it means to *Common Table*?
- Q.7.a.i* What does *Common Table* consider to be most essential in the message and mission of the Church?

Q.7.a.ii How does *Common Table* envision its relationship to the world? To the state? To the kingdom of God?

Q.7.b How would you describe your present involvement in the Springfield Community?

Q.7.c What do you believe to be *Common Table*'s relationship to the Springfield community?

Q.8 Common Table and the Future – What are the aspirations of this church?

Q.8.a What are your hopes for the future of *Common Table*?

Q.8.b Do you have any fears about what it could become?

Q.9 Contributions of Common Table – What is this church contributing?

Q.9.a What would you like for the wider Church to learn from your community?

Q.9.b Is there anything about *Common Table* that you would like me to know about that I have not asked?

Appendix I: Participant Interview Schedule Changes

Q.1 Biographical Information

Biographical Information stayed the same. The only alteration made here (and throughout the rest of the schedule) was changing *Novitas* to *Common Table*.

Q.2 Current involvement with Common Table – What does it mean to belong?

Q.2.a I deleted the second question in this line which asks, ‘What are some of the reasons that you are a part of this community?’ This question has been deleted here because in my previous interviews it would often open up the door to discuss the participant’s emergence from his or her previous church experience. These dynamics were addressed in Q.3.

Q.2.c This question was changed from, ‘Do you feel like you have any formal (or informal) commitments to this community?’ to ‘Have you made any formal (or informal) commitments to this community?’ The reason for this was two-fold. First, *Common Table* did indeed have a formal membership liturgy that it employs as opposed to *Novitas* which did not. Second, this question frequently needed further explanation when I asked it in Wellingham. The rewording not only added clarity to the question, but also better addressed the context of *Common Table*.

Q.3 Past involvement with Church – What does it mean to emerge?

Q.3.b.i This question which asks, ‘How did you discover *Common Table* and become a part of this community?’ was deleted for the sake of shortening the interview schedule. Most participants in Wellingham typically addressed the details of this question in the answering of previous question (*Q.3.b* which asked, ‘What were the reasons for your emergence from previous exposures of church to become a part of *Common Table*?’)

Q.3.b.ii The question designation was changed from *Q.3.b.ii* to *Q.3.c* as a result of deleting the previous question.

Q.4 Contemplating Common Table – What does this church value?

Q.4.d This question which asks, ‘What past story or event best captures the spirit of *Common Table*?’ was deleted for the sake of shortening the interview schedule. Most participants in Wellingham laboured to identify a story or event that could capture the ethos of the community.

Q.4.e The question designation was changed from *Q.4.e* to *Q.4.d* as a result of deleting the previous question.

Q.5 Practices of Common Table – What does this church do?

- Q.5.a.i* The question designation was changed from *Q.5.a.i* to *Q.5.b* as a result of deleting the following two questions.
- Q.5.a.ii* This question which asked, ‘What is your involvement with the community outside of formal gatherings?’ was deleted for the sake of shortening the interview schedule. It was redundant as I had already asked for the participant to describe what a typical month of involvement looks like (*Q.5.a*). This description of a typical month usually included involvement in both the formal and informal activities.
- Q.5.b* This question which asked, ‘Why are you involved in the various things that you are involved with at *Common Table*?’ was deleted for the sake of shortening the interview schedule. As I gained more confidence as an interviewer, I was able to illicit the pertinent ‘whys’ of the participants involvement through following lines of interest allowed for in the semi-structured format.

Q.6 Beliefs of Common Table – What does this church confess?

- Q.6.c.iii* This question which asked, ‘Are there any beliefs that you know of which would not be allowed in the community?’ was deleted for the sake of shortening the interview schedule. This question was similar to the following question which asked, ‘Do you think that anyone would ever be excluded from participating based upon what they believe?’
- Q.6.c.i v* The question designation was changed from *Q.6.c.iv* to *Q.6.c.iii* as a result of deleting the above question.

Q.7 Mission of Common Table – What does it mean to be missional?

- Q.7.b* This question was changed from, ‘How would you describe your present involvement in *Fulcrum Café*?’ to ‘How would you describe your present involvement in the Springfield community?’ The reason for this change was that *Fulcrum Café* was designated specifically as the missional expression of *Novitas*, whereas *Common Table* did not have a comparable expression.
- Q.7.bi; Q.7.b.ii; Q.7.b.iii* These questions which askrd, ‘Do you consider it a church?’, ‘What does it mean for you to call it a church?’, and ‘What do you think the mission of *Fulcrum Café* is?’ have been deleted because they explicitly address *Fulcrum Café* and therefore were not relevant to the context of *Common Table*.

Q.7.c This question was changed from, ‘What do you believe to be *Novitas*’ relationship to the *Fulcrum Café*?’ to ‘What do you believe to be *Common Table*’s relationship to the Springfield community?’ The reason for this change was similar to the above change—namely *Common Table* did not consolidate their missional expression around something like *Fulcrum Café*.

Q.7.c.i This question which asked, ‘What do you believe to be *Fulcrum Café*’s relationship to the city centre?’ was deleted because it explicitly addresses *Fulcrum Café* and therefore was not relevant to the context of *Common Table*.

Q.7.c.ii This question which asked, ‘What do you believe to be *Common Table*’s relationship to the city centre?’ was deleted for the sake of shortening the interview schedule. After the rewriting of Q.7.c this question was redundant.

Q.8 *Common Table and the Future – What are the aspirations of this church?*

The questions in this section remained identical, with the exception of changing *Novitas* to *Common Table*.

Q.9 *Contributions of Common Table – What is this church contributing?*

Q.9.a.i This question which asked, ‘What unique contributions do you see *Common Table* making to the Church universal?’ was deleted for the sake of shortening the interview schedule. Again, because I was more confident as an interviewer, I was able to illicit this data through following up on the previous question.

Q.9.a.ii This question which asked, ‘What do you feel like is your own personal contribution to *Common Table*?’ was been deleted for the sake of shortening the interview schedule. Similar to a previous question, most participants in Wellingham laboured to answer this question. I suspected that many were uncomfortable with the prospect of drawing attention to their own contributions.

Appendix J: Leader Interview Schedule Changes

Q.1 Biographical Information

Biographical Information stayed the same. The only alteration made here (and throughout the rest of the schedule) was changing *Novitas* to *Common Table*.

Q.2 Current involvement with Common Table – What does it mean to belong?

Q.2.a The first question in this line was changed from, ‘What is your present role in *Common Table*?’ to ‘What does it mean for you to be a leader of this community?’ The reason for this change was twofold. First, it was redundant as I already asked this question in the biographical section in Q.1. Second, it needed expanding in light of the fact that I deleted the second question in this line.

I deleted the second question in this line which asked, ‘What are some of the reasons you have chosen to be a leader of this community?’ This question was deleted here because in my interviews in Wellingham, it would often open up the door to discuss the leaders emergence from his or her previous church experience. These dynamics are addressed in Q.3.

Q.3 Past involvement with Church – What does it mean to emerge?

The questions in this section remained identical, with the exception of changing *Novitas* to *Common Table*.

Q.4 Contemplating Common Table – What does this church value?

Q.4.c This question which asked, ‘What past story or event best captures the spirit of *Common Table*?’ was deleted for the sake of shortening the interview schedule. Leaders in Wellingham laboured to identify a story or event that could capture the ethos of the community.

Q.4.d This question which asked, ‘What do you think *Common Table* means to most of the people who participate? Why do you think they belong?’ was deleted for the sake of shortening the interview schedule.

Q.4.e The question designation was changed from *Q.4.e* to *Q.4.c* as a result of deleting the previous two questions.

Q.4.f The question designation was changed from *Q.4.f* to *Q.4.d* as a result of deleting the previous two questions.

Q.5 Practices of Common Table – What does this church do?

- Q.5.a.i* The question designation was changed from *Q.5.a.i* to *Q.5.b* as a result of deleting the following two questions.
- Q.5.a.ii* This question which asked, ‘What is your involvement with the community outside of formal gatherings?’ was deleted for the sake of shortening the interview schedule. It was redundant as I had already asked for the leader to describe what a typical month of involvement looked like (*Q.5.a*). This description of a typical month usually included involvement in both the formal and informal activities.
- Q.5.b* This question which asked, ‘Why are you involved in the various things that you are involved with at *Common Table*?’ was deleted for the sake of shortening the interview schedule. As I gained more confidence as an interviewer, I was able to illicit the pertinent ‘whys’ of the leaders involvement through following lines of interest allowed for in the semi-structured format.

Q.6 Beliefs of Common Table – What does this church confess?

- Q.6.c.iii* This question which asked, ‘Are there any beliefs that you know of which would not be allowed in the community?’ was deleted for the sake of shortening the interview schedule. This question was similar to the following question which asked, ‘Do you think that anyone would ever be excluded from participating based upon what they believe?’
- Q.6.c.i v* The question designation was changed from *Q.6.c.iv* to *Q.6.c.iii* as a result of deleting the above question.

Q.7 Mission of Common Table – What does it mean to be missional?

- Q.7.b* This question was changed from, ‘How would you describe your present involvement in *Fulcrum Café*?’ to ‘How would you describe your present involvement in the Springfield community?’ The reason for this change was that *Fulcrum Café* was designated specifically as the missional expression of *Novitas*, whereas *Common Table* does not have a comparable expression.
- Q.7.bi; Q.7.b.ii; Q.7.b.iii* These questions which asked, ‘Do you consider it a church?’, ‘What does it mean for you to call it a church?’, and ‘What do you think the mission of *Fulcrum Café* is?’ have been deleted because they explicitly address *Fulcrum Café* and therefore are not relevant to the context of *Common Table*.

Q.7.c This question was changed from, ‘What do you believe to be *Novitas*’ relationship to *Fulcrum Café*?’ to ‘What do you believe to be *Common Table*’s relationship to the Springfield community?’ The reason for this change was similar to the above change—namely *Common Table* does not consolidate their missional expression around something like *Fulcrum Café*.

Q.7.c.i This question which asked, ‘What do you believe to be *Fulcrum Café*’s relationship to the city centre?’ was deleted because it explicitly addresses *Fulcrum Café* and therefore was not relevant to the context of *Common Table*.

Q.7.c.ii This question which asked, ‘What do you believe to be *Common Table*’s relationship to the city centre?’ was deleted for the sake of shortening the interview schedule. After the rewriting of Q.7.c this question was redundant.

Q.8 *Common Table and the Future – What are the aspirations of this church?*

The questions in this section remained identical, with the exception of changing *Novitas* to *Common Table*.

Q.9 *Contributions of Common Table – What is this church contributing?*

Q.9.a.i This question which asked, ‘What unique contributions do you see *Common Table* making to the Church universal?’ was deleted for the sake of shortening the interview schedule. Again, because of growing in my confidence as an interviewer, I was able to illicit this data through following up on the previous question.

Q.9.a.ii This question which asked, ‘What do you feel like is your own personal contribution to *Common Table*?’ was deleted for the sake of shortening the interview schedule.

Appendix K: *Novitas* Focus Group Schedule

Q.1 Most striking features of the *Novitas* Community.

Q.1.a The Questioning Community

Q.1.a.i When I contemplate my experiences at *Novitas*, the portrayal that defines this community more than any other is that it is a space for faith inquiry and theological exploration. This manifests itself with reoccurring themes of doubt alongside faith, questioning inherited beliefs, seeking to understand other traditions, rethinking ‘church’ for a city centre context and creating a safe place to work through individual crises of faith.

When asked, “what does this community value?” most interview participants spoke—at least in part—of a place where discussion is encouraged and questions are welcomed.

My initial reflection on my times on Wednesday nights was that it reminded me more of a postgraduate seminar or R.E. course than it did a worshipping faith community.

Other community phenomena related to this feature of questioning are a more egalitarian ethos, where any and all can contribute, and a playful irreverence towards many ‘church’ norms.

“Do you think this an authentic description of your community?”

Q.1.a.ii Can this experience of a place of inquiry be meaningful for someone who has no previous faith commitment to question or explore?

Q.1.b The *Novitas* / *Fulcrum Café* Dynamic

Q.1.b.i The other feature that I found incredibly striking, was the relationship between *Novitas* and *Fulcrum Café*.

Perhaps it was an assumption I made prior to joining this community, but I had envisioned a much closer relationship between the two entities. However, upon arriving I quickly realized that there were two very distinct communities, connected only through a shared physical space, and perhaps through figures such as Ethan and Dave.

This disconnect between *Novitas* and *Fulcrum Café* seems to be widely recognized in the community and addressing this disconnect factored heavily into

decisions surrounding the future of the community—most notably, the hiring of a new community leader and the establishment of entities such as TRIP.

“Do you think this is an authentic description of your community?”

Q.1.b.ii Does the *Novitas* participant’s lack of proximity to the city centre / *Fulcrum Café* factor into this disconnect?

Q.1.b.iii In what way is *Novitas* a city centre community?

Q.2 Themes that emerged from my participation in *Novitas*.

Q.2.a Wednesday Night Gatherings

Q.2.a.i The gathering on Wednesday nights is an important aspect in the life of *Novitas*. While it is not critical (or common) for an individual to attend every week, it does seem to be significant in defining participation in the life of the community.

It appears to me to be the primary place where the theological processing and probing of the community occurs. The lighting of the candles seems to mark of a sacred time when the community is gathered in the name of the triune God.

Singing does not take place during this time. Corporate singing is seen to be culturally irrelevant and a form of faith confession that may be inappropriate for the beliefs of the community.

The space is set up in a café style, which fosters a decentred atmosphere and helps to facilitate discussion. In this setting all presumably have equal say in the conversation and the time is not dominated by a single talking head.

While the gathering is important, ‘church’ is not confined to this space and may also be lived out in places like pubs, flats, work, etc.

“Do you think this is an authentic description of your community?”

Q.2.a.ii Can someone belong to *Novitas* and NEVER gather with the community on Wednesday night? (i.e. only connects through relationships and *Fulcrum Café* activities.)

Q.2.a.iii What about the video screen? If there was one entity that seemed to serve as a focal point, it was the video screen.

Q.2.b Missional Participation in Wellingham

Q.2.b.i Another theme that emerged is the desire for missional participation in Wellingham.

The city centre culture is an important theme here, and this community evidences a deep affection for this context. In general, there is a two-fold stance in regards to the city centre culture.

First, there is a desire to have a space to engage with spiritual matters in a form that is rooted in the culture and not alien to the life of someone who lives and works in this context. Therefore during the corporate gatherings, *Novitas* strives to creatively engage matters of spirituality through culturally relevant apparatus such as film, music, art, etc.

Second, there is a desire to be a spiritual presence in the city centre. This can be seen in activities such as ‘solitude in a public space’ and the *Fulcrum* night café where mission takes the form of presence, welcome and hospitality.

“Do you think this is an authentic description of your community?”

Q.2.b.ii What is the difference between the street preacher and the bishop who stands in glass display box? Is it a difference in tone? Is it a visual presence vs. a verbal presence? Is it the theological differences that one would assume accompanies the different practices?

Q.2.c An Ethos of Inclusively.

Q.2.c.i The *Novitas* community strives to be a welcoming and inclusive community. Participation and inclusion in the community is open to all regardless of ones faith persuasion, doctrinal beliefs, or sexuality—to name a few examples.

Although no one would be excluded from participating in the community based upon who they were or what they believed, destructive behaviour that is harmful to the community could be reason for exclusion.

Interviewees also suggested that others—particularly those who find themselves out of step with the inclusive and welcoming ethos of *Novitas* —may self-exclude.

“Do you think this is an authentic description of your community?”

Q.2.c.ii What about those with children? There were several conversations that I sat in on while at *Novitas* that seemed to suggest that those with children are struggling to feel included in the community.

Q.3 Ecclesiologically locating the *Novitas* Community.

Q.3.a Anglican-Methodist partnership and Fresh Expressions

Q.3.a.i Although *Novitas* predates the Anglican-Methodist Fresh Expressions initiative, it currently exists under the auspices of those sponsoring churches. As such, *Novitas* considers itself rooted in the wider church and the wider Christian tradition. Although one does not need to adhere to any Anglican or Methodist affirmations or practices to be a part of *Novitas*, differences between the church's paid leadership and the participants seem to surface when the community begins to tread into matters that are of ecclesiological import—for instance, ordination, the Eucharist, baptism. I get the sense that the participants are more willing to rethink and reinvent these practices than the church's paid leadership.

Also, a notable number of folks from *Novitas* that I met and interviewed have had some prior exposure to the evangelical wings of these churches. Consequently, folks are still responding to this experience to varying degrees.

“Do you think this is an authentic description of your community?”

Q.3.a.ii In interviews and interactions, when participants want to distinguish *Novitas* from other churches, they often did so with the evangelical church as the antithesis. Since my project will need to also distinguish emerging church from other traditions (traditions other than evangelicalism), could you describe some of the distinctive characteristics of *Novitas* compared with other traditions.

Q.3.b Verbal Orientation vs. Visual Orientation.

Q.3.b.i If a rough spectrum were to be created, and one end was designated ‘catholic’ and the other ‘protestant’, one could map where a community might fall on that spectrum through a number of factors. I want to think right now about whether a community is verbally oriented (including spoken word and written text) or visually oriented. If we were to do the mapping, the more visually oriented a community is, the more ‘catholic’ it might appear; the more verbally oriented a community is, the more ‘protestant’ it would appear.

When considering *Novitas*, I see a mixture of verbal and visual in its practices—indeed it appears to be

significantly more visual than the ‘typical’ protestant community. That said, the verbal orientation still dominates much of the meaning making that takes place in the community—particularly as participants process their faith and theological understandings, they do so through dialogue and discussion.

“Do you think this is an authentic description of your community?”

Q.3.c A penchant for ecclesial eclecticism.

Q.3.c.i A number of the interviewees—particularly those who have been with community a bit longer—suggest that *Novitas* is not doing anything that is necessarily radical or unique, but is simply trying to be faithful to their own local context, just as the church has attempted to do for centuries.

I find this assessment compelling and would agree that much of what is taking place in this community can find parallel in other Christian communities across the globe and throughout history. Yet, what I do think is unique about this community is the way in which *Novitas* eclectically blends various traditions, beliefs and practices in order to shape something that is in fact distinctive from all other ecclesial traditions.

“Do you think this is an authentic description of your community?”

Appendix L: Common Table Focus Group Schedule

Q.1 Most striking features of the Common Table Community.

Q.1.a The Eucharist celebration.

Q.1.a.i The way in which communion is practiced at Common Table is unlike anything I've been a part of.

Not only is it striking in the way in which it is enacted, but when speaking with folks in interviews, the table was referred to often as the central practice of the community.

There is an incredibly strong social dimension to this act, as well as impulses of egalitarianism and inclusivity.

As I was re-reading through my field notes in preparation for tonight I discovered that there was a HUGE learning curve for me. It was difficult for me at first. Not for theological reasons *per se*, but just general uncertainty as to what I was suppose to be doing.

Still, I would consider the table... and the unique way it is performed... to be central to this community.

“Is this an authentic description of your community?”

Q.1.a.ii What makes this space, this table, this point in the life of the community unique? (vs. the snack table) Is it the actions, the words, the liturgy, the elements?

Q.1.b The percentage of academically affiliated participants.

Q.1.b.i The other feature that I found incredibly striking was the percentage of participants who either have advanced degrees or are currently affiliated with the academy in some way.

I recognize that we are in an academic are here in the area. But this too was unlike any experience I had previously had with church.

“Is it accurate to describe your community as being constituted by high degree of academic participants?”

Q.1.b.ii Does this unintentionally serve as some sort intellectual barrier for participation?

Q.2 Themes which emerge from my participation in the Common Table Community.

Q.2.a Sunday night gathering.

Q.2.a.i The gathering of the community on Sunday nights is an important aspect in the life of *Common Table*. First and foremost, it is the space in which the community participates in the Eucharist.

The liturgy and church calendar are also important features during this time and. Music plays a central role in navigating through Worship, confession, absolution and benediction.

Along those lines, in interviews participants (especially those who had been a part of the community for a longer period of time) expressed affection for the liturgical components of the gathering.

The space is set up “in the round” with the intention of fostering a communal atmosphere.

Words such as dialogue and conversation are used as substitutes for words like preaching and sermon and attendees are encouraged to vocally participate in this portion of the liturgy.

While the gathering is important, “church” is not confined to this space and may also be lived out in pubs, neighbourhoods, work, etc.

“Is this an authentic description of your community?”

Q.2.a.ii Can someone belong to *Common Table* and NOT gather with the community on Sunday nights? (Importantly, this element the church’s life is podcasted.)

Q.2.a.iii What does the stool represent?

Q.2.b Missional Participation in Springfield.

Q.2.b.i Another theme that emerged could be summed up in these paraphrases: “We strive to discern and enter into the redemptive work of God.” OR “We look for what God is doing redemptively and then seek to participate”

This frequently takes on a local flavour with emphases on addressing issues in the Springfield community. Particular involvement with *Our City Care*, a local political activist group is one example of this. Some members of the community participate in this organization, while others are involved more in their own spheres of activity.

Emphases are placed on caring for and serving this community with particular attention to the economic and racial injustices.

This activity is organic and missional participation means there is an aversion in the *Common Table* community to church programs to address issues or needs.

“Is this an authentic description of your community?”

Q.2.b.ii To what extent are people who live outside of Springfield excluded from participation?

Q.2.b.iii I hear more about this sort of activity than I do about “emergent”. How do you account for this more local emphasis?

Q.2.c A space for theological and intellectual inquiry and discussion.

Q.2.c.i One of the other themes that emerges is a stated appreciation for a space in which questions are OK and theological discussion and academic engagement may be pursued in the community.

This aspect is particularly attractive to folks who are newer to the community.

There is no “official” doctrinal stance of the community, but clearly there is a Christological focus, with many of the participants finding meaning in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In fact, the minister’s liturgy, which is the means by which one aligns oneself to this community makes certain claims about being gathered in Christ’s name.

“Is this an authentic description of your community?”

Q.2.d A desire for more diversity within the community.

Q.2.d.i A repeated desire in both my interactions with participants and in interviews was for increased diversity within the community.

Diversity in age and race is particularly mentioned.

“Is this an authentic description of your community?”

Q.2.d.ii Are there any measure being taken to increase diversity or to be more inclusive?

Q.3 Ecclesialogically locating the Common Table Community.

Q.3.a Community participants distinguished themselves by using the American evangelical church as a backdrop.

Q.3.a.i A high percentage of folks from *Common Table* that I met and interviewed have come out of some form of evangelicalism.

“Is this an authentic description of your community?”

Q.3.a.ii In interviews and interactions, often when participants want to distinguish *Common Table* from other churches, they will do so with the evangelical church as the antithesis. Since my project will need to also distinguish emerging church from other traditions (traditions other than evangelicalism), could you describe the distinctive characteristics of *Common Table* as compared to other traditions.

Q.3.b Verbal Orientation vs. Visual Orientation.

Q.3.b.i If a rough spectrum were to be drawn, and on one end there were placed churches and traditions which are verbally oriented and on the other end there were placed churches and traditions which are visually oriented; the churches on the visually oriented side would be of a ‘catholic’ or ‘orthodox’ persuasion and the churches on the verbally oriented side would be of a ‘free church’ or ‘evangelical’ persuasion.

Common Table strikes me as being a very verbally oriented community. Much of the worship engagements are words either spoken, read, or sung. Indeed, there are visual elements present, and the central practice of the Eucharist possesses visual properties, but overall much of the *Common Table* gathering is verbally oriented.

“Is this an authentic description of your community?”

Q.3.b.ii Is there a more visual element to *Common Table* to which I have not been exposed?

Q.3.c A penchant for ecclesial eclecticism.

Q.3.c.i When contemplating the unique contribution of *Common Table*, I noticed a strong penchant for ecclesial eclecticism within the community. In other words, there exists an intentional borrowing of ‘the good’—that is ‘the perceived good’—of various church traditions.

Thus, what I believe is unique about this community is the way in which *Common Table* eclectically blends various traditions, beliefs and practices in order to shape something that is in fact distinctive from all other ecclesial traditions.

“Is this an authentic description of your community?”

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